

AMBITION, PRIDE AND PASSION
RAISED HER TO NEW HEIGHTS
OF LOVE AND SPLENDOR

Crimson Conquest



(Original title: MISTRESS OF THE SUN KING)

Sandra DuBay

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WIFE TO A MARQUIS, MISTRESS TO A KING

Abused by her brutal husband, lovely Athenais de Montespan yearned for the love of the one man in all France who seemed completely beyond her reach. That man was the handsome, sensual King Louis XIV. As Maid of Honor to Queen Marie-Therese, Athenais was constantly in Louis' presence, and at last she won his heart.

Surrounded by every luxury, envied by every other woman at the Court of Versailles, second in power only to the King himself, Athenais at last thought her future secure. But then she was forced to confront a rival for her lover's affections, a woman she herself had raised from poverty and introduced to the French Court.



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IN HIS ARMS, SHE WAS A QUEEN

Inside, Louis secured the door and turned to Athenais. The bright moonlight filtered through the walls between loosely joined boards, gleaming on their hair and casting an ethereal glow on their features. Neither spoke for a moment; the knowledge that they were about to fulfill the promise of the past days lay heavily between them. At last Louis drew her to him and drove all doubt from her mind with a kiss as different from the one in the loft as autumn is different from spring. He lifted her easily into the hay bin and, casting aside his garments, joined her there.

"Athenais," his voice was soft, filled with a tenderness she had thought she would never hear from him, "how long I've waited!"

"Louis," she returned, thrilling to his touch, "and I."

They were merged into a mutual longing, willingly yielding each to the other, enslaved by the passion that had existed between them since before either had recognized its presence .

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PROLOGUE—1660

Athenais de Rochechouart de Mortemart studied herself in the tall cheval glass across the room. Surrounded by a bevy of dressmakers and maids, she was being fitted in a gown of the most luxurious material she'd ever seen.

"Mon dieu! I am going to die!" a flustered voice cried agonizedly behind her. The proprietor of the voice, the Duchesse de Mortemart, Athenais's mother, paced round and round her daughter fluttering her fan in a flurry of motion.

"Oh, Maman," Athenais contradicted crossly. "You've been promising that for weeks but I've yet to see you do it!"

"A fine thing to say to your Maman!" The Duchesse drew herself up indignantly. "Ungrateful child!"

Athenais, christened Françoise didn't suit here, rolled her eyes exasperatedly and sighed as the agitated dressmaker and her endless stream of assistants pulled the heavily embroidered satin gown into place. And now Maman was going to make her speech again, she knew it from memory.

"It is an honor," the Duchess began for the thousandth time, "to be Maid of Honor to the Queen!"

"The Queen should be honored to have a Mortemart in her household," Athenais shot back.

"Do not let the King hear you say that!" the Duchesse cautioned, although not a little pleased at her daughter's sense of pride.

Athenais lifted her chin summoning all the dignity her nineteen years of life had instilled in her. "I will tell him!" she insisted stubbornly.

"Yes, tell him! And see how far down you can plunge our family's fortunes!"

A sobering thought, but true. Descendants of the Princes of Aquitaine and possessors of an ancient name and rich heritage, the Rochenchouarts and Mortemarts had been at the forefront of the French nobility for nearly a thousand years. Unfortunately it had been a thousand years of spendthrifts and extravagance. Athenais, her two sisters, and brother had grown up in genteel poverty. Their proudest possession was their name and they traded on it. Her brother, Louis-Victor, Duc de Vivonne and two years her senior was one of the King's closest friends, a member of his intimate circle. Now she intended to join that circle.

She looked around the room, her heavily lashed dark brown eyes betraying her satisfaction at the ever-growing number of fully laden clothes chests scattered around her. Her wardrobe, lessons in etiquette, dancing, and all the pursuits of the Court had been carefully attended to. She laughed when she thought of the dancing master, a thin, nervous man whose high squeaking voice matched his highly strung emotions. But thank heaven her parents had been willing to spend the money! She would be ready! Not that she cared for the Queen. In her opinion Marie-Thérèse was a disappointment, dull and overly pious. She'd eagerly accepted the appointment because it meant excitement. Nobles, gambling, theater, the endless entertainments, they were a heady image to her young mind and she intended to

grasp the opportunity with both hands!

"You have your brother to thank for this," her mother reminded her.

Athenais stood motionless, impatiently waiting for the dressmaker to finish the alterations on the elaborate gown. At last she could take no more. "I'm tired of hearing about my sainted brother!" she screamed. Stamping her foot she heard, not without a measure of satisfaction, a large dish of pins scatter over the cold marble floor of the anteroom where she stood.

The maids and dressmakers sighed, Mademoiselle Athenais's outburst was nothing unusual, her temper was well known.

"Tired indeed!" She wagged a sharply pointed finger at her daughter. "My son, my Louis. Victor has been more than generous to you." She raised her eyes ecstatically. "Louis. Victor, a friend of His Majesty! Who would have imagined it!"

"You would have!" Athenais reminded her, "Is that not why you put up with His Majesty's mother, Anne of Austria? Is that not why you saved and borrowed to make certain that Louis. Victor could grow up in close company with the King?"

Ignoring her daughter's insolence Madame de Mortemart swept from the room.

The dressmaker stepped back to admire the fruit of her labors.

"Are we finished for now?" Athenais asked wearily.

"Yes, Mademoiselle." The dressmaker directed her assistants in the hazardous operation of removing the pinned-together gown.

Slipping a dressing gown over her lace-trimmed chemise, Athenais took refuge in her cool bedroom. It was not the largest chamber available to her in the rambling chateau but to her it was the most attractive.

She lay on her four poster bed gazing toward the open window. A cool, sweetly scented breeze reached her from the thick forests, native to Poitou, surrounding the chateau. An undercurrent of excitement had been running through her ever since her brother had sent word of her appointment, but she couldn't deny a feeling of sadness which shook her at the thought of leaving her childhood home. That the time would have come eventually was inevitable. She was the daughter of the Duc de Mortemart, Prince de Tonnay-Charante and the fact her brother was the Duc de Vivonne and high in the King's favor only increased her value on the aristocratic marriage market. She would go to Court, attract a highly ranked and rich nobleman to whom the Mortemart and Rochechouart names meant more than a fabulous dowry, and get married. It was the course of life for one of her station.

A light knock at her door broke into her thoughts. "Come in," she called absently.

The thick door opened and Madelon des Oeilletts, Athenais's little personal maid entered the room. Carefully closing the door behind her, the maid abandoned the formality they displayed in public and upon which Athenais's mother insisted, and ran across the chamber to land in a heap on the bed next to her mistress.

"I am so excited!" she cried gaily. "We are going to Court!"

"You are lucky Louis-Victor agreed to your accompanying me!" Athenais reminded her, sounding not a little like her mother.

"Oh, I know but I am too excited to be grateful!"

Athenais could hold in her enthusiasm no longer. "So am I!" she laughed. "So am I! We will see the King every day! He is so handsome. Perfect!" She lay back,

savoring the deep richness of the velvet coverlet, its deep crimson embroidered with silver matched the hangings caught up to the high bed posts. "I remember His Majesty's wedding to the Queen." In fact, her only exposure to Court life thus far had been the event of the King's marriage.

"It was only a short time ago, you should remember!" Madelon laughed, then sobered at the cross look Athenais tossed her. "I can't wait to get to Court!" Her pale, cornflower blue, slightly protuberant eyes were shining. "How Madame, your mother, will strut through the galleries."

Athenais laughed, an image of her mother in her mind. "She will corner everyone she sees and regale them with stories of her precious Louis-Victor." She leapt to her feet and, wrapping a black lace shawl around herself, performed her flawless impersonation of her mother. "Have you heard?" she asked, her voice high and affected one hand tightly gripping Madelon's arm. "You have heard about my Louis-Victor? He is the most handsome, the most intelligent, the most brilliant . . ." she paused, a thoughtful expression on her face, "excepting His Majesty, of course."

Madelon giggled, the impression was so apt. It was just like the Duchesse to except His Majesty only after serious consideration.

They talked long into the night, discussing their hopes and expectations but eventually Athenais felt the need to be alone and sent Madelon away.

The girl left and Athenais blew out the candles and tugged the bedcurtains closed on three sides leaving open only those on the side of the bed facing the window. The silvery moonlight, emerging from between dark billowy clouds, illuminated her bed like a tiny secluded cave. Reaching beneath the top feather mat-

tress she pulled out a miniature of the King she had stolen once on a visit to her brother's Paris townhouse.

Turning the miniature toward the light, Athenais drank in the thick, lushly waving brown hair which fell to surround a deep lace collar. His eyes were a brilliant blue-grey and his lips, beneath a tiny mustache, were sensuously full and pouting. Athenais caught her breath in the darkness. She'd been presented to His Majesty, of course, her rank and lineage afforded her entrance to the Court, and she remembered the feeling evoked within her by the meeting of those blue-grey eyes and her own luminous brown ones. She pressed her hand against the soft flesh above her breast where her heart-beat raced in anticipation of meeting those eyes daily when she became a Maid of Honor to the Queen. After all, it was said that the King's new mistress, Louise de La Vallière was plain, shy, and altogether unsuited to the rigors of being mistress to a great monarch. And where had His Majesty found Louise? In the suite of the Duchess d'Orléans, his own sister-in-law. Might there not be another mistress? Might it not be easier to come to the attention of the King in his wife's suite? Athenais remembered glances exchanged between a petulant twenty-three year old bridegroom, disappointed in his mother's choice of a wife, and a lovely nineteen year old girl who frankly adored him. Nineteen was an age, after all, when many girls were already married! Louise de La Vallière was only seventeen and there were rumors that she was carrying His Majesty's child!

Stowing the miniature safely in its place beneath the mattress and her ambitions to the back of her mind, Athenais pulled the remaining bedcurtains closed and forced herself to seek sleep.

Chapter I—1667

Versailles

Athenais, Marquise de Montespan, rose from the wide bed, pushing back the heavy velvet hangings as she went. Behind her, Pardaillan, the Marquis de Montespan, her husband, suddenly snored loudly and turned on his side.

"Oaf!" she muttered as she crossed the room to her mirrored dressing table. Striking a flint, she lit a candle which cast deep shadows across her reflection. She was twenty-six years old and desperately bored.

For seven years she'd been at Court. Seven years of putting up with that stupid little Spaniard of a Queen. Seven years of pretending to be a friend of the colorless Louise de La Vallière. And still the King showed her no indication that he intended to make her his mistress. At last, in desperation, she'd married Pardaillan. Her eyes went to the sleeping figure on the bed. Louis-Henri de Pardaillan de Gondrin, Marquis de Montespan. He'd pursued her since her first appearance at Court, not surprisingly, she told her reflection. She was, by popular opinion, the most beautiful woman at Court and, consequently, in France. She'd finally married him and spent the last three years interminably bored.

"Athenais?" Pardaillan was awake.

"Yes?" She turned coolly toward him.

"Come back to bed." His eyes clearly conveyed his intentions.

Athenais smiled sweetly, fluttering her eyelashes coquettishly, "Go to hell," she breathed.

He returned her smile; their arguments were becoming the high point of their marriage. "Bitch."

Pursing her lips, Athenais blew him a kiss and returned her attention to the mirror. Her reflection stared back at her appraisingly. Her skin was white with delicate tinges of pink across her cheeks and her large, dark eyes were framed by thick lashes above which her eyebrows swept into dark arches. Beneath her uptilted nose, her full red lips pouted. Watching her from the bed, Pardaillan could tell what was on her mind.

"Yes, my dear, you are ten times more beautiful than that mouse La Vallière."

Athenais looked disappointed, "Only ten times?"

"I am not going to satisfy your hungry ego."

"Ah, Pardaillan," she sighed, changing the subject, "do you think my dress will suffice for the ball tomorrow?" She glanced uncertainly at the satin gown, its color barely visible beneath the frosting of embroidery.

"I think your dress will suffice to have us carted off for debt!"

"It's true," she admitted. "I had to borrow to pay part of the cost but it's worth it." She pouted becomingly into the mirror, "I hate living here. Why don't you do something to ingratiate yourself with the King and get a better room in the palace? We're stuck way up here in the attic."

"You have a right to rooms as one of the Queen's ladies."

"Yes, but with all the damned work being done on this drafty old barn my rooms are torn to pieces."

"Why not stay with La Vallière?" His tone told her that he was becoming bored.

"His Majesty comes to visit Louise and I hate to be in the next room when they are together."

"Jealous?"

She smiled cryptically, "Louise is such a hypocrite! As soon as the King leaves she is weeping and asking God's forgiveness and a minute later she is wishing he will come again soon."

"Such is the life of a royal mistress."

"She makes a poor royal mistress. She has no aptitude for the position."

Getting no response, she turned. Pardaillan had fallen asleep once more, his severe soldier's face relaxed into softer lines. "Good!" she laughed, she was in no mood for her husband's attentions tonight. Moreover, she had only recently managed to regain her figure from the birth of her child. Children! She rolled her eyes. They were so messy and cross! Thank heaven her son had a nurse to keep him occupied. She was in no hurry to have another.

The close air of the room was becoming stifling to her. Why couldn't Pardaillan assert himself and get a better room? His "suite" consisted of the one room in which she now sat, its tiny confines completely filled with the large bed, her dressing table, and an entirely inadequate armoire. She couldn't even open the window as it faced a stinking courtyard.

Footsteps in the corridor outside the door caught her attention. Snatching up a cloak she wrapped it around herself, covering her lawn and lace nightgown, and stepped to the door, being careful not to disturb her husband's unsuspecting slumber. Opening the door as little as possible, she peeked through. Peguillin, Duc de Lauzun, tiptoed down the hall.

"Peguillin," she whispered, stepping through the doorway.

"Ah, the beautiful Athenais." He swept his plumed

hat from his head and made her a bow worthy of royalty. "How may I serve you?"

"I'm so bored," she pouted her lips exactly as she had before the mirror on her dressing table. "I'm unable to sleep and Pardaillian's room is so stuffy. I stepped out here for a breath of fresh air."

"Fresh and cold!" As they spoke little puffs of steam rose into the air. "Why don't you join me for a glass of wine to warm you?" His blue eyes sparkled. Peguillin, wallowing happily in his hopeless quest for the hand of the Grande Mademoiselle, was the rascal of the Court, no one was immune from his tricks.

"Where is this wine?" Athenais asked, already knowing.

"In my room, of course!"

"I don't know." She glanced at the door behind which her husband lay sleeping.

"Come," he took her hand, "I won't take no for an answer."

Athenais followed Peguillin down the icy corridor. Not far from her husband's room was a door which read, "For the Duc de Lauzun."

"Lucky you!" she exclaimed. "Pardaillian's room has merely his name on the door." To have "For" preceeding one's name was a signal that the occupant was in highest favor with the King.

Peguillin, not releasing her hand for a moment, opened the door and led her inside. His room, though on the same attic level as Pardaillian's, was furnished more elegantly and seemed larger and more comfortable. The curtained bed filled a large corner of it and a fireplace occupied one wall. The room, after the chill of the corridor, seemed overly warm to her and she was tempted to remove her cloak.

She fanned herself lightly and gestured toward the

fireplace, "Do you have to have the fire so high? I am burning!"

Peguilin winked naughtily, "Perhaps it is not the fire! It is the wine and your passionate nature." He reached toward her and drew the satin and velvet cloak from her shoulders.

"Peguilin!" Athenais blushed becomingly, the knowledge that her night attire left few of her allurements to the imagination stirred her sensuously.

In her companion's eyes she saw a reflection of her emotions. The Duc de Lauzun's merry blue eyes had darkened to a smoldering violet.

"My pet," he whispered conspiratorily, "I hope you are not leading me on. Do not break my heart." Gently he removed the delicate wine glass from her grasp.

"I would never do that," she answered. "I know what it is to be disappointed in love." She thought of the King as she wrapped a curl of his long blond hair around her finger.

"We are two of a kind," he murmured. His kisses lit tiny fires along her cheek, throat, and trailed toward her breasts. "Perhaps we could comfort each other."

"Oh, I don't know if I should," she hesitated coquettishly, knowing that her racing pulse was betraying her.

"I will not take no for an answer," he told her, mock severity in his voice.

She knew she would yield to his desires—and her own. "The moonlight is so bright." She glanced toward the window which faced the forests.

"Whatever you wish." Accommodatingly, he jumped up and drew the thick drapes across the window. The room was illuminated only by the dancing flames of the fire.

Turning back to the bed, Peguilin's eyes shone with delight to find Athenais lying seductively beneath the

soft satin sheet, her smile provocative in the firelight. Swiftly he removed his clothing and joined her in the bed. Murmuring softly, the rest of Versailles, the thousands of people in various rooms all around, ceased to exist for them.

* * *

"Madame! Madame!" The hushed voice of Madelon des Oeillets came through the door.

In the wide bed Athenais stirred. It was still dark. Extricating herself from beneath the arm of Peguillin, she retrieved her discarded nightdress and slipped into it. Hurriedly she ran her fingers through the tangled hair tumbling around her shoulders.

"Madelon!" She opened the door and, with a last wistful look at the slumbering Peguillin, wrapped her cloak about her and joined her maid in the corridor. "Is Pardaillian awake yet?" she asked as they hurried down the hallway.

"No, Madame, but he may have awakened during the night."

Entering the room she'd left in the night, Athenais sat once more before her dressing table and began pulling a tortoiseshell and gold comb through the golden-brown masses of her hair.

"Ah, you've returned." Pardaillian reclined on his elbow.

"Yes, at last." She sighed, "Honestly, Louise is such a baby!"

"And what was her trouble?"

Athenais slammed the comb onto the table convincingly. "She said it was a bad dream but I suspect it was a fit of pique because the King didn't visit her last night."

"I don't know what His Majesty sees in so babyish a

mistress." The Marquis de Montespan rose from the bed. "Well, I must hurry if I'm to get to His Majesty's levee. I'm to have the honor of handing the King his hat," he paused thoughtfully, "Unless the Duc de Lauzun has returned in which case he takes over the honor."

Athenais watched her husband dress. Any courtier who wanted the honor of watching the King prepare for his day had to be ready by eight every morning. The ladies of the Court, on the other hand, had more time. Her Majesty never stirred before nine.

The door closed behind Pardaillan and Athenais called for her maid. "Help me dress, Madelon. I want to arrive at the Queen's levee with Louise de La Vallière."

Chapter II

Louise de La Vallière was tired. Each sunrise found her less decorative. Her silver-blond hair was limp and lusterless, her once envied slenderness now bordered on emaciation. She had borne four children in six years as the King's mistress, three of them were dead. His interest was waning, his eyes straying. She was no longer an ornament of the Court. She was twenty-three. Her affair with the King caused her no end of chagrin for she felt guilty and sinful when she lay in His Majesty's arms and yet her heart was painfully rent with the knowledge that she was not his only mistress.

She'd begun as a Maid of Honor to Madame, Duchesse d'Orléans, and it was through Madame that she'd become Louis's mistress. They were in love, Madame and the King, but both were married and their love was a scandal in the eyes of Louis's mother and the Court. And so, at Madame's suggestion, Louis had taken a mistress, Louise. She knew Madame had chosen her thinking that she was no competition. Madame was charming, witty, and shone brightly in any company. Louise, on the other hand, was shy, retiring, and preferred to be a face in the crowd. But Louis, loving the hunt and the admiration of all, had fallen in love with Louise. Her great talent was her horsemanship and in any company Louise rode far ahead of the hunt, the

goddess Diana incarnate. Her modesty and shy admiration of the King had inflamed Louis's passions and he had turned from Madame to her Maid of Honor.

And now, Louise sighed into her mirror, her toilette took longer every day and nothing could hide the ravages of poor health. In addition, her closest friend was Athenais de Montespan. Athenais was exquisitely beautiful and robustly healthy. Beside her Louise looked like a skeleton in Court dress. But she could not do without Athenais for the Marquise de Montespan was the only one who took the time to encourage and cheer her. Athenais was at her side in the painful moments when she had to face the Queen with all the guilt she felt rolling inside her. Moreover, Athenais was fascinating and made the King laugh, even in his lowest moods. He often came to Louise's rooms to sit and converse with the lovely Athenais.

Alone in her bedchamber, Louise felt compelled to ask forgiveness for her sins of the flesh. How could she go on with her grievous offense against God and the laws of her religion? And yet, through the walls of her repentance, came the longing for the King. To hear the tender words he spoke, his gentle ways with her. A light scratching on the door of her chamber caught her attention and, having sent her maids away, Louise rose to answer the door.

Athenais scratched on Louise's door with the long nail of the little finger on her left hand, as Court etiquette demanded. Where was that little milksop, she thought impatiently. Didn't she even send her maid to answer the door anymore?

The gilded door swung open and Louise stood there. As always, Athenais was shocked to see the pallor of the royal favorite. She had changed drastically since the long-ago day when she had confessed her admiration

for the King to Athenais in the forests of Fontainebleau. How could Louis, handsome and virile, stand to spend his time with this haggard and sickly creature? Louis, who hated sickness, who had turned an elderly countess out of the palace for complaining about the cold.

"Good morning, Louise." Athenais was adept at hiding the shock Louise's appearance always evoked in her. She swept past Louise and into the chamber. "You're going to be late for chapel this morning," she warned. The Queen went to chapel every morning and those ladies who did not arrive in time were treated to a royal frown when they made their belated entrance.

"I don't know if I can stand to go." Louise's chin quivered and Athenais braced herself for a flood of tears. "Her Majesty will be taking Communion this morning."

Athenais struggled to compose her face and hold back the laughter choking her. The Court enjoyed the joke. Her Majesty complained long and loudly that she did not receive His Majesty's romantic attentions as often as her passionate Spanish nature would have liked. When she did spend the night with the King, she made a spectacle of taking Communion the next morning and telling everyone who would listen of her good fortune.

"Compose yourself, Louise. After all, His Majesty must make love to the Queen. They have only one heir, the succession is not as secure as he would like.

A ridiculous hope dawned in Louise's pale blue eyes. "Yes! That's true, that's why he didn't come!" Sitting at her dressing table once more, Louise began to eagerly complete her preparations. "Athenais, would you call Babette to do my hair?"

"Oh, don't call your maid." Athenais moved to the mirror. "I will do your hair."

With great difficulty and a multitude of combs,

Athenais managed to arrange Louise's dead, bodyless hair into a flatteringly ornate style. "See there?" she said as she patted the last fat curl into place. "It makes you look ten pounds heavier."

Louise peered into the mirror while Athenais carefully moved away to avoid a comparison. Encouraged, she picked up the cloak she habitually wore. The icy chill of the huge cavernlike corridors and chambers pierced her thin frame.

Once outside her apartment, she lagged behind her friend, the slight limp she'd had all her life was becoming progressively worse. Enviously, she watched Athenais fairly skip down the marble corridor. Her gown was far off her shoulders and if the cold bit at her bare skin she seemed unaware. If anything, the low temperatures only brought a heightened blush to the exposed flesh.

The Queen's apartment was crowded and none of the ladies present missed the look of pleased triumph which Her Majesty threw to the favorite. Withering before the Queen, Louise grasped frantically for the reassuring warmth of Athenais's hand and blushed like one who knows he is intruding where he's not welcome.

The Queen of France, Marie-Thérèse, formerly Infanta of Spain, sat crowing before her mirror. She had refrained, with difficulty, from ordering her customary cup of chocolate and was regaling all those present with the virtues of His Majesty.

"Good morning, Mademoiselle de La Vallière!" she cried in her badly spoken, heavily accented French. Smiling a superior smile the Queen displayed her chocolate and garlic blackened teeth. "Do you join the other ladies in our hope that my encounter of last night will result in a child for France?"

Louise's chin quivered once again as she answered

softly, "Yes, Your Majesty."

Athenais thought both were ridiculous. She recalled the one time the Queen had attempted to assert her rights to marital fidelity. She had refused the King her bed and it had taken months of coaxing to persuade him to return. Even the proud Anne of Austria had to beg her son to forgive his childish Queen. She needs her ears boxed! Athenais thought. And how I'd love to do it!

The allies of the Queen did not bother to hide their disdain for the beaten Louise and the chapel service was a torment. Several times Athenais pressed her hand in the cool dimness of the magnificent chapel and felt the thin frame shaken with repressed sobs. When at last they could leave, Athenais drew Louise into a secluded alcove, hidden by a tapestry.

Immediately Louise broke into racking sobs. "I am so unhappy!" she wept, "I cannot bear it any longer!"

"Louise, calm yourself!" Athenais shook her gently, feeling the delicate bones so near the surface. "What can be so wrong?"

"I am pregnant again."

Athenais resisted the urge to turn her gentle shakings to cruel blows and then her anger turned to pity. How, in the name of God, could this wasted body support a new life? Surely Louise could not survive this pregnancy. A guilty flush spread over her cheeks when she realized the gravity of her thoughts. In an attempt to exorcise the guilt, she comforted the stricken Louise. "Do not cry, Louise," she pleaded. "You are the favorite! The recognized favorite!"

Until the recent death of Anne of Austria, Louis had carefully avoided a confrontation of his elderly mother and his mistress. Her children, living or dead, were spirited out of the palace the moment they were born. To add to her grief, all but one of her children born

alive had died in infancy. But, immediately after the death of the Queen Mother, Louise had taken her place at the King's side. It was a constant source of annoyance for Athenais to see the furtive and guilty manner in which Louise occupied that position.

Louise's fit of tears had passed leaving her more pale and haggard than ever. Athenais dabbed at her splotted cheeks with a handkerchief. "Come Louise, we must go back to your rooms. Do you want the King to arrive and find no one there?"

"Shouldn't we attend Her Majesty?" Louise asked, her eyes wearing their eternally guilt-ridden look.

"Does His Majesty not visit you after his meetings of state?" Athenais spoke gently, as though reminding a child.

"Yes." There was no joy in the admission.

"Then you must await his pleasure where he will expect to find you."

Once that would have meant her bedchamber but, as Athenais knew through Louise's childish confidences, the King sought her bed less and less these days. When he came to her rooms it was, more often than not, merely for refuge from the packs of self-seeking courtiers that trailed his every step.

Leading her by the hand, Athenais fairly dragged the hesitant Louise to her chambers. Once there, she made a point of having Louise lie down to rest while she scrutinized her own appearance in the large looking glass. She'd specially chosen this gown and she planned on the King's noticing.

A maid opened the door. "His Majesty is coming," she informed Athenais with an uncertain glance at Louise's exhausted form on the bed.

"Thank you, I'll see to Louise."

With another glance, the maid bobbed a curtsy and

left the room. Athenais checked her appearance once more. In the anteroom, she heard the click of the King's high heels on the polished floors. Moving softly she opened the connecting door just enough to slip through.

Louis XIV stood in the ivory and gold paneled anteroom looking, as he often did, like a well-to-do country squire. It was a side of him that those not on intimate terms with the Court were invariably surprised to see. He was twenty-nine years old—he had been King of France for twenty-four of those years, although King in his own right for only seven. At twenty-two he had asserted his rights over his mother and Cardinal Mazarin. And now he stood before Athenais as he had so often. His suit was a somber velvet of a midnight blue, the webbing of silver embroidery exquisite but not overwhelming. His shoes were a matching color with the exception of the contrasting red heels. The blue of his suit brought out the blue in his changeable eyes and his hair was brushed into the flowing curls which accentuated the youthful appearance of his face. He did not, except on grand occasions, affect one of the numerous wigs kept in a room built especially for them adjoining his bedroom. His appearance now was one of elegance and dignity. On the most splendid occasions, his clothing was decorated with gems and embroidery until the fabric beneath was scarcely visible and he wore the towering, elaborately curled and scented wigs. Even then he gave the appearance of an almost overpowering masculinity. This could not be said about many of the men of the Court. Monsieur, the King's own brother, was the leader of a large band of powdered, scented, painted young men with a decided penchant for each other.

Athenais stepped into the room and, closing the door quietly, sank gracefully to the floor in a curtsy which

was, perhaps, a shade too deep but nonetheless beautiful.

Rising once more, she looked up into the eyes of the King. His slumberous eyes, which he rarely opened wide, were as heavily lashed as her own. There was nothing about him in which she could find fault. Impossible as it seemed to mortal men, Louis XIV appeared to fulfill the promise of the middle name given him at birth which meant literally, "God given."

"I'm sorry, Your Majesty," Athenais began, her voice carefully soft and her tone apologetic. "I was not aware of your imminent arrival. I'm afraid Louise is asleep. I shall wake her." Turning toward the door, she felt the King's restraining hand on the flesh of her arm and she steeled herself against the slight shudder she felt start within her.

"Do not wake her," Louis said, his voice seemingly made from the same soft, rich velvet as his suit. "We shall talk, you and I, and perhaps she will awaken while I am here."

They sat on a little seat of gilded wood and brocade which just accommodated the two of them, Athenais's full skirts taking up any excess room. Respectfully, she waited for the King to open the conversation.

"I do not think you are the woman you pretend to be, Madame," he began.

Athenais started, the King's opinion of her would mean the success or failure of her plans. "What do you mean?" she asked, a sinking feeling inside her.

"I mean that you sit here so quietly and respectful and yet I myself know you to be witty and amusing."

She repressed a sigh of relief. "I thank Your Majesty. I was merely waiting for you to open the conversation."

"Ah," breathed the King, not displeased by her respect. "I see. Well, let's talk about you."

Athenais laughed. "A subject with which I am intimately acquainted."

"And I," the King agreed. Launching into a monologue, Louis displayed his uncanny knowledge of the lineages of his nobility. He knew Athenais's ancestors back to the France of a thousand years before. When he'd finished, she laughed once more.

"I see Your Majesty is even more intimately acquainted with me than am I."

"With your family at any rate," he agreed.

She brushed a flounce of lace into place on the bodice of her gown.

"That is French lace?" the King seemed surprised. It was common knowledge that the courtiers much preferred the superior materials and laces of foreign manufacture which, because of increased tariffs, were often smuggled into the country.

"Indeed it is!" Athenais assured him. "And this brocade is entirely French in manufacture. In fact," she informed him proudly, "everything I am wearing was made in this country."

Louis was visibly impressed. "You are a marvelous advertisement for French products, Madame. I am very pleased to see so lovely a lady make use of our native craftsmen."

Inwardly Athenais rejoiced. It was for this moment that she'd had the ensemble created. Louis had been, for quite some time, trying to encourage the use of French-made materials. Thus far he had met with the greatest reluctance on the part of his nobles.

"It is my pleasure to please Your Majesty," she said demurely, anxious that he not read an overt invitation into her statement. There were few women of the court who had not thrown themselves at the young King and Athenais preferred not to be merely one in a crowd.

"Yes," Louis looked at her in that heavy-lidded manner of his, "I am very pleased." He raised one of her white hands to his lips and Athenais sighed as his face was momentarily hidden by his hair while he bent over it. Their eyes met and she held her breath.

"Athenais?" A weak voice called from the bed-chamber. Louise was awake.

Athenais forced herself to remain outwardly calm although she was seething with a desire to destroy the pathetic creature behind the door. "Louise has awakened," she told the King. "I will bring her to you." Rising from the seat, she dropped another graceful curtsy and turned to the door. Damn you, Louise! Damn you! she chanted to herself, her sharply pointed fingernails, turning to claws, bruised the tender flesh of her palms as they curled involuntarily. She reached the door and turned once more to the King, a carefully arranged smile composing her features. "It will be only a moment."

The King smiled and she left the room.

Louise sat on the edge of the bed. "Oh, Athenais!" she wailed, looking like a disheveled street urchin, "You should not have let me fall asleep!"

"Nonsense!" Athenais told her brusquely. "You need all the sleep you can get. Come, I'll fix your hair and you can go to see His Majesty."

"He has waited?" The grateful, sad light glinted in her pale eyes.

"Of course, he has waited. He knows that a woman in your state of health must have her rest."

Louise was panic-stricken, "You did not tell him that I am pregnant?"

"Of course not. We did not speak of it," Athenais told her truthfully. "Now you must hurry; he may grow impatient." Working quickly, Athenais arranged the limp hair into a semblance of order and watched as the

trembling Louise stepped through the door to meet the King. As the door closed, Athenais caught sight of herself in the mirror and grimaced sympathetically. "What does he see in her?" she asked the room. Leaning against its high, carved post, she buried her face comfortingly in the soft hangings of Louise's recently vacated bed. Distractedly she touched the smooth flesh of her hand where the King's lips had touched her. Surely, she told herself, surely he must tire of her soon. And when he does . . . Turning, she smiled a secret smile at her reflection—and when he does!

Chapter III

Madelon des Oeillets entered Athenais's rooms breathlessly. Slipping the nondescript cloak from her shoulders, its large hood falling back to reveal her pretty features, she caught her breath in raspy gasps.

"Well, don't just stand there!" Athenais demanded impatiently. "What did she say?"

Madelon had just returned from a journey to the home of Catherine Monvoisin, well known at the Court though few would admit to having made her acquaintance. La Voisin as she was known, was the leading fortune teller in France, consulted by the highest in the land. She lived in a villa near Saint-Denis and her dinners and parties were well attended. Reaping all the benefits of Court trade, she numbered among her numerous lovers several highly placed courtiers as well as the public executioner. Her advice and potions were sought to cure problems of figure and appearance as well as luck in gambling and in love. She could do wonders, it was said, when an unwanted child was in the making. Her real fortune, however, came with her apparently impeccable discretion. After hearing of her reputation, Athenais, in desperation, had sent Madelon to investigate.

"Well?" Athenais demanded once more.

Madelon drew one more deep breath, she knew her mistress would not like what she had to say. "Madame Voisin says she must see you personally to discuss the problem. It cannot be solved through an intermediary."

"Wonderful!" Athenais stormed around the tiny but beautiful rooms allotted her through her lineage and her position as Maid of Honor to the Queen. She was lucky, she knew, to have such rooms. It was not unusual for courtiers to be found frozen or starved in the attic garrets given to the lesser nobles. But her lineage and rank could not solve this problem.

"Seven years!" she continued, "Seven years I have been at Court. Seven years of watching the King pander to that dull-witted dishmop Louise. And now, now I have to court a fortune teller!" She ranted and stormed and pouted. "If she thinks I can pick up and run to her for advice she is mistaken!" Athenais did not relish the long, rough ride and it was true that the King had an uncanny talent for picking out absentees and questioning them on their whereabouts.

"Madame Voisin will gladly come to you here," Madelon offered.

No doubt she will! For a marked increase in pay. She and that thieving daughter of hers will see what they can lay their hands on!" As she spoke her mind raced. Might it not be better to have the old witch brought to Paris? She could find a way to go to her husband's hôtel and meet her there! Surely she could find a time when she would not be missed. "Madelon . . ." she began.

"When do you want her here?" Madelon knew her mistress. She could read the play of expressions crossing her face.

Athenais's mind raced. This was Tuesday—on Thursdays the King was often tied up until late in the afternoon, barely taking time for dinner. There were

always many petitioners waiting to take up the one period of time he set aside each week for private audiences. "Not here—in Paris," she instructed thoughtfully, "Two days hence, in the morning." She smiled at her reflection in the broad dressing-table mirror. Was it her imagination, or did her future already look brighter?

* * *

Thursday dawned quickly, too quickly. The day of self-imposed waiting between her decision to consult the fortune teller and the day she was to go to Paris, was fraught with doubt. Was she making the right move? Dark rumors of evil doings, sacrilegious and blasphemous rites which went on at the house of La Voisin, circulated in hushed tones through the salons and antechambers of the Court. What, Athenais wondered, would she be expected to do in exchange for the influence she was seeking? Would the witch and her cronies be satisfied with money? The possibilities terrified her. Several times he had nearly called off the meeting and then she would see the King. She saw him with La Vallière, she saw him with Madame, she saw him gracefully performing the royal duties which became him so well. When by chance they would meet, the King was as polite and as distant as ever. It was time such as these which convinced Athenais to keep her appointment in Paris.

"Madame! Madame!" Madelon shook her roughly. It was early, far earlier than Athenais's accustomed waking hour. She merely groaned and turned away. At last the frustrated Madelon shouted in her ear, "Athenais! Get up!"

With a gasp, her eyes flew open and she sat up.

"Don't scream like that!" Wearily, she began the laborious process of rising and preparing for the journey. "Does Guillaume know when to have the carriage ready?"

"Yes, yes. He knows," Madelon assured her. "He's been with you so long, you know he wouldn't forget."

This was true, she knew. The old driver had come with her from Poitou seven years before when first she arrived at Court. "Does anyone else know?"

"No, although when the maids arrive at the usual time they'll wonder at your being gone so early."

Athenais shrugged. "They can think I'm with Louise. I'll be back before I'm really missed."

Madelon nodded reluctantly. She disliked the entire proceeding which, to her way of thinking, reeked of back alleys and devil worship. "What if he is there?" she asked in a stage whisper.

"He who?" Athenais whispered exaggeratedly in the same voice.

"The Devil." Madelon looked about the room as though expecting demons to pop out of the walls.

Athenais started nervously but refused to betray her fears, even to this most trusted of servants. "Don't be silly, Madelon." She gave a high pitched laugh which seemed to have lost its carefree edge. "The Devil has nothing to do with this. We're merely asking for advice."

"You're asking for advice!" Madelon corrected.

"I'm asking for advice," Athenais repeated crossly. "Thank you."

Ready at last, the two women pulled all-covering cloaks around themselves. Constructed with hoods and veils, the cloaks effectively masked their identities and also nearly smothered them. Leaving the warmth of Athenais's rooms, however, they were glad of the cover-

ings. Even though it was well into spring, the damp chilled the atmosphere of the palace. Mists drifted in, seemingly through the keyholes of doors, and obscured the vaulted ceilings so as to make the already cavernous rooms appear to reach into the clouds. Their heels tapped sharply on the cold marble of the floors. Athenais noted with relief that the only other people about at this early hour were footmen scurrying to be at their masters' beck and call when they awoke and guards dozing at their posts.

Emerging from the palace Madelon stopped to catch her breath. "Oh, Madame! It's so eerie!"

Athenais stopped. It was, indeed, breathtaking. The heavy mists rising from the marshes in the middle of which the palace was being built, swirled among the tress and surrounded the building and its inhabitants as in a thick web. Piles of supplies, broken masonry, and discarded tools gave the picture a strange flavor of decay as though the forests were reclaiming the area rather than the other way around. Athenais shuddered, suddenly the very trees of the forest loomed threateningly toward them. The mists blurred their details until a limb here appeared as an upraised clawish hand, a tree there seemed a giant monster.

"Come on!" Athenais shook off the spell and dragged Madelon down the steps to the waiting carriage. "You and your bleatings have gotten me imagining things!" Her foot sank into a muddy section of the courtyard which had yet to be paved. "And this damned swamp . . .!"

They reached the carriage gratefully and old Guillaume bundled them inside. With one footman along in case of emergency, the vehicle turned around affording them a last view of the palace. Rolling off into the forest, the carriage shook as it navigated the rutted, muddy road.

"This damned swamp!" Athenais repeated to no one in particular. "All France is the King's for the asking and he has to build in a swamp!"

The carriage rolled on through the forest toward Paris. Behind them, the Court began to stir, coming to life and bustling into action. Ahead of them if, as Madelon kept insisting, they were lucky enough to escape being captured by highwaymen, lay an experience which neither would remember with pleasure, nor would they ever forget it.

The Paris of the morning was worlds apart from Versailles. The languid, yawning awakening of the Court contrasted with the hustle and bustle of the city coming to life. The odors and noises which had been a part of the city long before anyone could remember were in evidence. Dogs roamed the streets accompanied by, and sometimes squabbling with, the perpetual bands of ragged children.

The carriage rolled into the courtyard of the Hôtel de Montespan. Built a generation or more before, it was very plain and, Athenais thought, completely without distinction. It plainly reflected the deflated state of her in-laws' purse.

"I hope the rats haven't taken over," Athenais muttered maliciously, listening for the agonized cry that a mention of that particular rodent always evoked from her maid.

The footman pounded on the door. At last the door opened slightly to reveal a disheveled man, obviously awakened by their noise.

Athenais realized that the main gate had been standing open upon their arrival. "A fine concierge you are!" she shouted, pushing past the startled man. "And what if thieves come? Do you never lock the gates?"

"But . . . but Monsieur le Marquis said I might as well

use the house. There is nothing for anyone to steal."

Glancing around with dismay, she saw that the man was correct. Here and there a worn piece of furniture sat beneath soiled sheeting. The rooms were completely bare of any type of knickknacks and the coats-of-arms embellishing fireplaces and wall decor were so encrusted with dirt as to be undecipherable. Even the chandeliers, their candles long-since guttered out, were grimy with none of their original prismatic effects.

The stark evidence of their poverty depressed her. With a tired wave of her hand she brushed it all away and turned to the concierge. "All right, if Pardaillian said you may use the house, you may. However, I would be grateful if you would use some of your time to try cleaning it up a bit."

Relieved, the man bowed awkwardly, "Yes, Madame la Marquise, I will, I promise."

"Now go out to the gate lodge and wait to admit another party I'm expecting. After they arrive, close the gates and admit no one until I leave."

"Yes . . . Yes." The man backed toward the door, tripping over his own ungainliness.

With a sigh, Athenais moved through the mansion; her velvet cloak and silk gown trailed through the dust, marking her path. Coming to a secluded and dark salon she instructed the footman to clear at least some of the dirt away. "Sweep it with one of the cloths." She indicated those covering the meager furnishings. "Then take another and cover the floor with it." The salon was carpeted and she scraped at the accumulated grime with her toe. Yes, somewhere under there was a rug. "I wish we had the money to get all of this replaced," she sighed to Madelon who had come up next to her.

"The place isn't too bad," a bit old fashioned, but most of them are," Madelon agreed.

"Well, maybe something will come along soon to help us out."

At that moment a low female voice announced its presence in the entry hall. Monvoisin had arrived. Athenais turned and, seeing the wide-eyed, frightened look on Madelon's face, said mischievously, "Well, speak of the Devil!"

Madelon moaned and covered her mouth. She obviously expected the fortune teller to enter the room accompanied by Satan himself. When the woman appeared, Athenais smiled in greeting.

Catherine Monvoisin, only a year older than Athenais herself, presented a far different picture than her profession implied. Small and darkly attractive, she seemed to be an average member of the upper middle class into which her Court clientele was rapidly placing her. And yet, if the rumors were true, she was the leading provider of poisons, abortions, and witchcraft in France.

Walking toward the woman, Athenais stopped suddenly as another figure stepped through the doorway.

A tall sinister man stood there. Reading the look in her client's eyes, La Voisin turned also. "Come in, come in," she invited, as though in her own home. "My dear," she drew Athenais toward her, "This is the Abbé Guibourg. He has agreed to help us in our endeavor."

Athenais suppressed a shudder. She'd heard of this man. In his middle sixties, he was tall, thin, and exuded an aura of evil for all his holy aspirations. His height, which was considerable, was diminished by the fact that he was hunchbacked, a feature which, although taking away from his height, added immeasurably to his air of dark mystery. He was reputed to be the illegitimate son of Henri de Montmorency, the sacristan of Saint-Marcel and Saint-Denis. In silence Athenais dropped him a shallow curtsy which seemed to please the old man.

All around them in the dark room, people were placing thick black candles in receptacles and lighting sickeningly sweet incense which gave off a bluish smoke, tingeing the already heavy atmosphere.

Athenais's clock was taken from her and, in spite of the fact that no fire had been lit to dispel the damp chill of the long disused room, she felt a sheen of perspiration gloss her bare shoulders.

"This is a relatively simple procedure," La Voisin assured her. "Unless, of course, you think you might rather have a more powerful ceremony."

"No, no!" Athenais assured her. "I'm sure a little assistance is all I'll need."

La Voisin smiled cryptically and moved away to oversee the preparations.

"Madame!" Madelon hissed over her shoulder.

"What is it?"

"Why don't we leave now?" Her eyes were pleading.

Athenais stared at her for a moment. "No!" The Mortemart determination, which some preferred to call stubbornness, showed clearly on her face. "Do you imagine that I want to spend another seven years flattering that imbecile Louise de La Vallière? I should have done this years ago!"

Attracted by their emphatic whisperings, La Voisin joined them, "Is there a problem?" she inquired politely.

"Will Madelon be needed for any part of the ceremony?" Athenais asked.

"No, we won't need her."

"Very well," she turned to the frightened young woman. "Go and wait in another part of the house or in the carriage."

Gratefully, but not without a little apprehension at leaving her mistress in the hands of these people, Madelon lost no time in gathering her cloak around her

and hurrying for the relative protection of the carriage with its coachman and footman.

In the salon, Athenais felt abandoned. She stood amid the preparations and, when called by La Voisin, started violently. "We are ready to begin."

Turning, Athenais recoiled. The figure which had seemed so evil before now loomed horribly before her. The Abbé Guibourg, his hunchbacked form clothed in vestments of white, embroidered with objects of a *non-religious nature*, awaited her. In a dream she moved forward.

She was later to remember the events disjointedly—the eerie, wailing voices of La Voisin's daughter and another woman Athenais didn't know rose above the droning of the Abbé. The shrill, penetrating tones of the bell rung to begin and end the ritual often shattered the silence of her imagination and in the glittering of a goblet or candlestick she remembered the shimmering silver of the chalice. Above all, however, she remembered the savage glitter of her rings and bracelets as she placed her hands over the prayer book the Abbé held and the trembling of her own voice as she repeated the prayers she had been taught.

"Astaroth and Asmodeus, princes of fellowship, I invoke thee to accept our offerings for that which I ask. Let the King love me. Let him leave La Vallière and never seek her again. Let the Queen be repudiated and me take her place. Let the Dauphin and Monsieur and Madame be my friends."

With added entreaties from the Abbé and more chanting, the ceremony was over. Quickly, the incense and candles were extinguished, the vestments packed away.

As the celebrants disappeared from the room, La Voisin approached Athenais. "Well, Madame?"

"That's all there is to it?" Athenais asked.

“Certainly, what did you expect?”

She glanced at La Voisin’s daughter who carried the receptacle containing the corpses of pigeons whose hearts had been offered to the powers of darkness.

“Ah,” the young witch laughed knowingly. “You expected perhaps a more costly sacrifice?”

Athenais shuddered once more, she had indeed expected the offering to be the rumored newborn child. She had been immeasurably relieved to find that such was not the case.

La Voisin stood before expectantly. For a moment Athenais regarded her uncomprehendingly and then the knowledge dawned. “Oh, of course,” she murmured. Rummaging through the depths of her cloak she pulled forth a leather purse heavy with gold. It represented a large investment for her but if the morning’s business bore fruit it would be more than worth the cost.

La Voisin weighed the purse in her hand. Athenais had no doubt that the woman could calculate the amount to the last sou. “More than generous of you my dear.” Her attractive visage cracked into a broad smile. “I am at your service.”

Staying behind as the woman departed, Athenais stood in the center of the room. It looked much as it had upon her arrival but, to her at least, the air seemed charged with an indefinable presence she could neither explain nor ignore. Suddenly, unable to bear the atmosphere any longer, she threw the heavy cloak about her shoulders and hurried from the building.

La Voisin and her companions had long since disappeared into the streets of Paris, retreating, no doubt, to her mansion in Saint-Denis to divide the morning’s profits. Madelon leaned anxiously from the coach window.

“Athenais!” she cried, forgetting the courtly formality in times of stress. “I was just about to send

Guillaume after you!"

"I'm fine," Athenais assured the maid as she was handed into the compartment. She sat quietly as the coach jerked forward on its way back to Versailles.

"What did they do?" Madelon questioned eagerly. As she herself had had no part in the actual ceremony, and now that it was behind them both, her curiosity knew no bounds.

"Nothing exceptional," Athenais told her absently. "Just a few prayers and such."

"Prayers to who?"

"I don't want to talk about it! I don't want to talk about anything!" Her mind was too full. Apprehensive and yet excited, she wondered whether the simple ritual in which she'd taken a part could possibly have the results she'd been promised. Having been raised in an atmosphere which was at once fashionably openminded and strictly religious, Athenais had spent many a morning listening to sermons of hellfire and demons. Tales of possession, selling of the soul, the incubus and succubus abounded in the rich forests of Poitou where legends were born in the drafty old castles. And now, as she rode toward the place where her destiny lay in wait, she thought of the gravity of her act. Fortunately for her, hellfire was as much a legend as the vampire and the werewolves and, at twenty-six, death seemed an impossible occurrence.

* * *

Athenais struggled into the weighty gown with Madelon alone to help her. She had decided against calling in the other girls of her suite in order to avoid attracting undue attention to her absence. So far her escapade had gone off without trouble. The Court was

waiting outside the conference chamber for the King to come from his private audiences. From there, he would go to his midday meal and then for a promenade in the gardens.

Settling the gown around her, its network of gold embroidery setting off the deep rose hue of the rich fabric, Athenais abandoned herself to the ministrations of Madelon and her combs and paints.

"I wonder," she mused aloud, "why the King is not spending the afternoon with Louise."

Madelon was silent in the "good servants" demeanor she adopted when the topic of conversation did not suit her.

"Ah, well," Athenais continued, "no matter." Her mood of guilty morbidity gone, she felt a carefree optimism nothing could dampen. Her preparations complete, she stood surveying herself in the mirror, tapping a fan idly against her teeth. "I wonder if I should visit Louise. No, as long as the King is going to be available this afternoon, I think I'll be wherever he is."

Ignorning Madelon's disapproving gaze, Athenais swept from the room and, along with a stream of other courtiers, arrived at the gallery where His Majesty was beginning this afternoon's promenade.

The King's walks in the garden were, unless otherwise announced, open to any who might wish to accompany him and there were hordes of courtiers jostling for position in the party. The King, resplendent in a suit which Athenais was overjoyed to see matched the shade of her gown exactly, advanced along the gallery amid the curtsying ladies and bowing gentlemen. From the low vantage point of her curtsy, Athenais heard the sharp click of his red wooden heels on the marble floor. The sound grew louder as he approached them and then it stopped. She held her breath; he had paused before her. Rising,

she found herself looking into the brilliant changeable eyes of the King.

He smiled. A hush fell over the assembly. "We seem to be a match, Madame." He waited expectantly.

Athenais was no stranger to the King. The hours she'd spent amusing Louis in La Vallière's apartment should have stood her in good stead but here, before the entire Court, she stood dumbfounded. She kept her gaze locked with his until it seemed there must be no one in Versailles but the two of them. "Indeed we are," she managed softly, a hint of double-entendre in her tone.

The King's expression never changed, only those nearest them would have been able to catch the slight widening of his habitually half-closed eyes. He turned to the rest, the spell was broken.

"Shall we go?" he invited, casually as a country gentleman offering a tour of his new manor. The Court passed Athenais who stood in a daze. Most were past her when she realized she was being left behind and whirled to follow the King down the steep stairs to the fountain of Latona.

By the time she was near enough to hear, the King was finished with his description of the mechanisms which pumped the water. He was moving on toward the fountain of Apollo when Athenais heard the name La Vallière in a conversation.

"Where is the favorite anyway?" a young Duc was asking an older Marquise.

"Taken to her bed, I hear," the Marquise answered. "I suppose she realized that she's better off when seen alone and not in competition with the other, healthy ladies of the Court."

Athenais felt a twinge of guilt at the thought of poor Louise lying somewhere within the depths of the huge, cold marble palace. But her heart hardened when she

glanced ahead and saw the King offer his arm to the Marquise de Sévigné. The overly plump, bulbous-nose Marquise was no competition for Athenais but it was obvious that Louis was open to the charms of ladies other than the formerly fair Louise and she was determined that the next object of his affections be Athenais de Montespan.

"Eh, Madame," a familiar voice came from behind her, "You are going to fall into the fountain."

Athenais turned and found Peguillin de Lauzun at her side. She was grateful to him for, had he not spoken to her, she would indeed have fallen into the pond surrounding the beautiful Apollo fountain.

"Peguillin, I thought you were away at the war." The King had recently become involved in the fight to claim the Spanish Netherlands for France through the Queen's position as an Infanta of Spain.

"I was, but now I am back."

Her heart fell, "Is Pardaillan back, also?" The Marquis de Montespan had left at the same time as Peguillin.

"No, only I have returned with dispatches for the King."

The promenade was by now quite a distance ahead of them and Peguillin, never cowed by majesty, shouted for them to wait. The company halted, unaccustomed to that kind of greeting, and turned toward the hurrying figures. Reaching the King's side, Peguillin bowed.

"You wanted something, Monsieur?" the King asked.

Only the fact that Peguillin amused him had saved the Duc from many stays in the Bastille for his impudence.

"Yes, Sire," Peguillin answered. "I wanted you to wait. The handsome Marquise and I were being left behind!"

"Ah, my apologies!" the King murmured, smiling. Behind them a few courtiers set up a disgruntled grumbling at the favor in which de Lauzun basked.

"We must see that you are not left behind again." The King offered his arm to the delighted Athenais, relegating Madame de Sévigné to the group behind.

The promenade resumed, Athenais flanked by the King and Peguillin. When, a few moments later, she turned to speak to the Duc he was gone, melted away into the crowd leaving her alone with the King. She blessed him silently, her erstwhile lover who was willing to use his position and favor to help her.

* * *

But the days rolled into weeks and Athenais continued to live in a kind of limbo. The King was neither cold to her nor was he any more intimate than ever. She smiled her courtier's smile in public but, in the privacy of her rooms, she railed against the apparent failure of her plot. She began to spend less and less time with Louise whose continued position as the King's mistress galled her as nothing else could.

The last straw occurred on a sunlit morning when Athenais arrived for the Queens levee to find Her Majesty in tears; her red-splotched complexion even more red than usual. She dabbed at her running nose and the tears which coursed down her quivering cheeks.

"What's wrong?" Athenais asked a nearby lady of the Queen's suite. She supposed that the King had been neglecting his conjugal duties again.

"It's La Vallière," the young Comtesse answered, "The King's made her Duchesse de Vaujours."

Athenais held her breath, willing her heart to beat normally. 'How lucky for Louise,' she murmured as the young woman returned to the Queen. Spinning on her heel she hurried from the Queen's apartments and past the head of the gorgeous marble Queen's Staircase.

She ran along the empty corridors and strolled nonchalantly along those where other courtiers lounged, carefully avoiding any conversations. At last she reached her rooms and threw herself on the bed with no regard for her coiffure and gown.

Madelon patiently waited for the storm to pass. "Why don't you ask La Voisin?" she asked. "It was she who told you the spell would work."

In short order the fortune teller stood before her. A carriage had been dispatched to Saint-Denis manned by four burly footmen.

"Is there a problem, Madame?" the woman asked.

"A problem!" Athenais fought to keep her voice under control. The walls of the palace were not so thick that one could shout without being heard. "Yes, there's a problem! I paid you a great deal of money to help me. Your influence isn't worth a sou!"

"You must be patient, Madame la Marquise." Long years of dealing with the noblesse had accustomed her to their impatience.

"I can't be patient!" Athenais stormed. "He has made La Vallière the Duchesse de Vaujours!"

"Yes, I know." La Voisin's intelligence network often enabled her to know the happenings at Court better than those whose home it was.

"And you can still tell me to be patient?"

"Duchies are often a parting gift to retiring mistresses."

Athenais stopped, hope springing up at the logic of the words. "But if it's not . . . !" Her eyes conveyed a threat.

La Voisin didn't flinch. "If there is no change within a short time we will have to see to the matter." The woman was smuggled out the same way she had been brought in and Athenais was left alone with her

thoughts. She would be patient, hard as that would be for her. She would see if La Voisin had spoken the truth.

* * *

The Court was going to war. The French armies were besieging Lille and the King was going to join them. With him were going the lords and ladies of his Court already making preparations for what was regarded as a lovely summer outing.

Athenais stood in her room supervising the packing of her clothing and personal effects. As a lady of the Queen's suite she was to accompany Their Majesties. As the last of her gowns were being packed away, a frantic pounding, unusual in an age when one scratched lightly at a door, startled her. Madelon opened the door and Louise de La Vallière stumbled into the room.

"Athenais! Athenais!" Her pale face was contorted with grief and the light blue of her eyes was surrounded with bloodshot redness. She crossed the room, oblivious to the staring servants, and threw herself into Athenais's arms.

With an imperceptible gesture Athenais signaled Madelon to clear the room and she led the sobbing girl to the large bed which dominated the bechamber. "Louise, stop. What can be the matter?"

In between chokes and gasps, Louise told her that the King had informed his newest Duchesse that she was not to accompany the royal party to Lille.

Over her shoulder Athenais exchanged glances with Madelon who had again entered the room. "What do you mean? How can he do without you?" Athenais asked, trying to keep the excitement from her voice.

"He has done without me for months!"

"For months! But he has spent many afternoons with

you."

"But never alone. If you are not there he invites someone else to come in and talk. We've hardly spent any time alone since little Marie-Anne was born last year."

She broke into fresh sobs and Athenais searched for words to express a grief she didn't feel. "Perhaps it is only for the Queen. She is pregnant again."

Louise snuffled, a light dawning in her eyes. Athenais thought she was pathetic, so ready to believe any stray bit of encouragement.

"Do you think he still loves me?" the King's mistress asked in a broken, child's voice.

"Of course he does. He's made you Duchesse de Vaujours, hasn't he?"

"Yes, that's true," she snuffled again. "But why can't I got to Lille?"

"He's worried for you, Louise. You're nearing your time. The journey will be very hazardous."

Louise's fragile hand went to her swollen abdomen. "But the Queen is pregnant and she is going."

"She is barely pregnant, Louise. And it is imperative that she be there to accept the surrender of the towns. They are claimed in her name."

At last Louise allowed herself to be mollified. Taking a tearful leave of Athenais, she returned to her rooms. She could not bear to watch the preparations for an outing to which she was not invited.

Just as Louise was left to her thoughts, so Athenais's mind was filled with images of opportunities to be found with the favorite languishing at home. The trip to Lille was a godsend, she thought. Then, with a shiver, she remembered La Voisin and the ritual in Paris. Was godsend the correct term? At any rate, she felt that her time had come. That for which she had waited so long was almost upon her.

Chapter IV

The Court was going to war. They left Versailles on a splendid adventure. Behind them, the tall gilded gates were closed, the courtyards empty, the fountains still. Somewhere in the cold marble depths of the palace were a few old, unhealthy courtiers, their servants, and a forgotten favorite.

The procession of carriages, carts, and horses started north, their destination—Flanders. The armies of France were engaged in the "War of Devolution," Louis XIV was claiming his Queen's rights to inherit the Spanish Netherlands.

The Spanish claimed the land as the inheritance of the four-year-old Charles II—successor to Philip IV. The French, citing a law of the Netherlands, claimed the territory. Marie-Thérèse, half-sister to the child King, was a child of her father's first marriage with rights of inheritance over the children of any successive marriages. The Spanish refused to consider any civil custom as legally binding and pointed out that, upon her marriage to Louis XIV, Marie-Thérèse had renounced all claims to Spanish inheritances. The French countered that, not only had the Queen been a minor when the renunciation was made, but the contract was only binding upon payment of her dowry—a dowry which had never been paid. Louis demanded that the Spanish either pay the

dowry or negate his wife's renunciation of her inheritances. The Spanish refused to do either and, in doing so, granted the young King his first opportunity to play the conqueror.

It was a wonderful expedition, the long procession of carriages and horsemen stopping at Saint-Germain and then resuming the northward journey. Athenais rode in the Queen's carriage. Marie-Thérèse, with her usual flair for the ridiculous, saw the King's battle as a romantic tournament staged in her honor. So relieved was she to find that he had ordered La Vallière behind that she began, uncharacteristically, to confide her innermost thoughts and desires to Athenais, whom she knew to be also a confidante of La Vallière's.

As they jolted along on road rutted by the passing of armies, which were hard and dusty on sunny days and muddy and treacherous in the rain, the Queen opened her heart to her lady. Several times it was all Athenais could do to restrain her mirth as the Queen marveled at the wonder of her husband, or hold in her jealous spite while the former Spanish Infanta recounted tales of cherished nights spent with the King. She was rewarded occasionally, however, when the King would ride back on his great white horse to inquire after his wife's health and Athenais would notice the way his eyes lingered on her rather than the stumpy form of Her Majesty.

The rude health which had been Athenais's since her birth stood her in good stead along the way. It was the custom of the King to stop only when he felt the need and he considered it a serious breach of good manners if one of his entourage, be he man or woman, could wait no longer. Even the Queen was not above the royal frown. To her credit, however, Athenais could manage very well and, as he noticed every detail of his courtiers' lives, Louis noticed her lack of complaint.

The Court left Saint-Germain in an unslackening state of adventurous excitement. From there they would disdain royal residences and even the country seats of the nobility. They were at war and as warriors would they behave. Barns, country inns, and even the carriages became their barracks and again Athenais profited. As the Queen's favorite companion she shared the comparative luxury of Her Majesty's accommodations, the best to be found whether at an inn where they shared the best room, in a barn where the cleanest hay was theirs, or in the padded velvet coach they shared by day. It all had its effect. While the other ladies of the Court paled and became haggard, Athenais bloomed. It would not, she knew, go unnoticed.

Nor did it. One particularly warm day while Athenais and the Queen languidly fanned themselves in the relative comfort of the royal coach, the handsome young Marquis d'Uxelles, his sapphire-blue eyes betraying his admiration, respectfully handed a folded paper to Athenais.

The seal was unmarked by any recognizable identification and, as she broke it open, she glanced at the young Marquis. "This is for me?" The young man nodded delightedly and the Queen's gay giggles betrayed her certainty that she must be privy to a budding affair.

At first glance Athenais caught her breath. No one at court for more than a fortnight could fail to recognize the King's distinctive handwriting. With a last glance at the Marquis and a flitting sensation of relief that she sat directly opposite the prying eyes of the Queen, Athenais began to read:

"Madame de Montespan, I find myself distracted constantly by your presence. You are as different from any other lady as day is different from night.

As has never before been my experience, I feel afraid to seek your company for fear that another may claim your affections and I would be sadly disappointed. You have, however, seemed to enjoy my company when it was my good fortune to meet you at Versailles. It is my hope that you will not prove adverse to a strengthening of the bonds of friendship between us.

Louis."

Athenais sat bemused. It was a note to her from the King! He had been afraid of her meeting his advances with rejection. Could that be? Could he actually imagine . . . ? He hoped she would not prove adverse to a strengthening of the bonds between them. It was beyond her comprehension, in excess of her wildest imaginings. Suddenly she remembered the Queen and the Marquis waiting. Her eyes met those of the Marquis. "There is no answer," she told him.

With a disappointed sigh, the Marquis spurred his horse forward to report to Louis. Marie-Thérèse leaned across the carriage as Athenais pushed the letter deep into the tightly laced bodice of her gown. The Queen held her hand. "How nice for you," she said brightly in her heavily accented French. "He is so handsome."

For a moment Athenais stared at the Queen in amazement and then, blushing, realized that Her Majesty apparently thought the note was from the Marquis d'Uxelles. "Yes, very handsome," she agreed, meaning the King.

"He will, perhaps, be your lover before long."

Athenais smiled, the double-sided conversation appealed greatly to the slightly darker side of her sense of humor. "Yes, perhaps he will."

"You should have given him an answer. Some hope at least," the Queen chided.

Athenais laughed her bright, ingenuous laugh, "No, I

prefer to keep him in suspense for a while." She laughed again and the Spanish woman joined her, winking conspiratorially.

* * *

It was a lovely sunlit day when the Court stopped for dinner in a shady glade on the edge of a forest. A clear, cold brook gurgled over stones and soon the laughter of the merry, careless Court of France echoed through the warm, fragrant air.

The meal was consumed with the ravenous gluttony common to such gatherings. Wine was drunk to excess and the company played games in the cool shade of the forest.

Athenais wandered toward the forest with a group of admiring courtiers. It was known that the King admired the Marquise de Montespan and so she was very much the fashion. As they entered the shady area, a spirited game of hide-and-seek was being organized. While the Marquise de Sévigné covered her eyes and counted, the giggling ladies and gentlemen of the Court sought hiding places nearby. Athenais had spotted an inviting bower near the stream at the edge of the wood.

She reached it, grateful that the others were too intent upon their game to think about accompanying her. Inside she found it slightly overgrown, as though it had once been part of a garden and was now abandoned. An ancient stone bench, its carved vines and blossoms matching those which tangled through the branches of the trees were weathered, the stone itself pitted. The trees surrounding her, once apparently trained to an ornamental shape, were growing wildly, distorted. So much the better, she decided, the tightly interlocking foliage hid her from the eyes of the Court, affording her

a rare opportunity to lose her ever-present smile and stiffly erect carriage.

A deep, relaxed sigh escaped her. Gripping the edge of the bench she leaned as far back as her arms would allow, tilted her head back, and closed her eyes.

"Headache?" A masculine voice broke the peace of her retreat.

Her eyes flew open to find the King standing before her. Momentarily shocked, she completely forgot to rise from her bench. "No, Sire," she assured him hastily. Louis had an impatience and horror of illness which brought disfavor to any who complained in his presence. She rose to her feet and dropped him a curtsy, rising to find him occupying her place on the stone bench.

Silence hung tensely for a moment. Athenais ventured a tiny smile only to be met by the King's stern and steady gaze. In the face of such an unfriendly mien she felt a flutter of apprehension start within her.

At last Louis broke the silence. "You are cruel, Madame."

Athenais's eyes widened. "How so?" she stammered, searching her memory for an incident which could have provoked such a comment.

"You do not deign to reply when one lays his heart open to you."

"Oh," she sighed, relieved. "I was with Her Majesty when the note was delivered. She thought it was from your messenger, the Marquis d'Uxelles." She smiled to indicate the sense of her reasoning, "I could not give an appropriate reply without revealing the true source of the note."

As the expression on His Majesty's face softened, Athenais was aware that her reply had satisfied him. He gestured for her to join him on the little bench.

"You may reply to my note now," he invited.

She lowered her eyes demurely, "I was overwhelmed, Sire. And honored by your attention. I would be more than happy to be your friend."

"There is no one else?"

The touch of anxiety in his voice made her giddy. "No, no one."

She raised her dark eyes to meet the light ones of the King. He took her hand and pressed it to his lips. "We shall be friends then," he told her, "the best of friends."

His meaning was not lost on her. "The very best of friends," she repeated, her tone carefully implying nothing.

As they sat in the tiny bower, the sun casting shady patterns through the leaves across their clothes and skin, they each abandoned themselves to contemplations of the understanding they'd reached. They didn't hear the rustle of approaching feet through the tall grass of the swish of full silk skirts. When the Marquise de Sévigné, still searching for Athenais, the last participant in their game as yet unfound, stuck her blonde head into their retreat she found them. Athenais's hand was still imprisoned in that of the King and they gazed deeply into each other's eyes.

"Excuse me!" the surprised and delighted Marquise puffed. She sank to the ground in her usual awkward curtsy.

In a second the King was on his feet, Athenais standing slightly behind him. The scene of a few moments before might never have occurred.

"Yes, Madame?" the King inquired icily.

"I was searching for Madame de Montespan," she stammered, her puffy cheeks more red than usual. "She was hiding in our game."

"As you can see, you have found her," Louis was enveloped in his cloak of majesty and Athenais marvelled at the change. "I would hope I need not mention discretion to you?"

"No! Of course not!" the Marquise assured him. With another deep curtsy she turned and hurried in the opposite direction.

Louis sighed. "Well, the news will be all over the Court in a matter of hours." The Marquise's penchant for gossip was famous. He smiled ruefully and offered Athenais his arm. "What is there to do but put on a haughty face?"

"She really has nothing to tell," Athenais pointed out.

"Speculation is as good as fact," the King replied. "But since we are in such close quarters at present, she may confine her gossip to letters. Were rumors to start here she would know that their source would be apparent."

Together Athenais and the King left their bower and moved across the clearing toward the carriages and assembling courtiers. Later, when Madame de Sévigné was seen writing furiously in the bumping carriage she occupied, many of the courtiers wondered what she could possibly find to tell. Athenais, on the other hand, wondered only to whom she was writing.

* * *

As the Court progressed northward, accommodations were increasingly difficult to find. At last, one night near the border, the only accommodation available was an immense and ancient barn. Inside, the loft was requisitioned for Her Majesty while the rest of the company was left to shift for themselves below. Powder and

perfumes mingled their scents with the more gamy odors of the recently gone animals. It was an atmosphere fraught with sensuality due to the proximity of lovely ladies and gallant courtiers which a happy quirk of fate had thrown together in this intimate arrangement. The Queen alone seemed to stand above it all, and seemed none too happy that the intrigues in which even her royal husband might take part were closed to her. In a fit of annoyance she ordered a group of ladies to join her in the loft. Those ladies, she'd been careful to choose, were the loveliest, most tempting of the entire company, a fact which the barely suppressed groans of disappointment revealed.

Late in the warm summer evening, the Queen and her company of ladies prepared for the night. Because of the nearness of the gentlemen directly below them, they confined their night attire to brushed-out hair, chemises and petticoats, removing only their constrictively laced bodices, heavy outer skirts, and stockings. The hayloft became a brightly colored patchwork of cloaks used to ward off night chills.

In the center of it all, Marie-Thérèse, looking as she usually did, like a weed in a flower garden, was having her hair brushed by Athenais. Normally the task might have fallen to another but the Queen claimed that Athenais had a lighter touch and soothed her nerves.

For her part, Athenais slid the brush through the thin, straight blonde hair languidly. Still in a dream from her conversation with the King in the bower, she neither wanted nor needed to join in the chatter of the other ladies. Nor did the Queen take part. In spite of her years as Louis's wife, she still spoke French haltingly and the quick, witty repartee was far beyond her capabilities.

At last all was quiet in the barn. Below, the gentlemen and ladies settled down. The King and some others of

the gentlemen were absent, somewhere in the night discussing the war. Above, in the loft, the Queen's chosen companions burrowed into the hay and drew their cloaks around them. Athenais lay next to the Queen lost in her musings. When finally the doors opened and the King and his party entered, many were awakened from the first drowsings of slumber.

Hurriedly lit lanterns showed the way for the King through the scattered courtiers. Athenais was once more pressed into service as the Queen was sure her moments of rest had disheveled her hair which, in the lantern light so flattering to Athenais, seemed lifeless and dead.

The King climbed the ladder to the loft where his wife and her preening companions awaited him. Of the ladies, only Athenais did not instinctively reach for her combs and mirror. She knew that her appearance, although hardly appropriate for a Court dinner or presentation, was perfect for the image of a beautiful young woman recently awakened from her sleep in a loft full of hay. Her hair was disheveled, the long dark curls falling in jumbled masses below her shoulders, her cheeks were flushed to a perfect pink, and the cloak drawn about her shoulders did not conceal the loose, low bodice of her thin chemise. Above and beyond all that, the frowzy Spanish woman beside her was the perfect contrast.

The tousled head of the King appeared over the edge of the loft floor. His brown curls, not so different in color and texture from Athenais's own, fell to the shoulders of his brown velvet coat. "Madame," he greeted the Queen.

"Good evening, Monsieur." She could barely keep the excitement from her voice, his neglected Princess of Spain.

"You keep lovely company I see," his eyes scanned

the loft full of ladies curtsying in their cloaks.

The Queen made an inane reply which Athenais could not hear. She was watching the King and did not miss the surreptitious glances he cast over at her.

Louis hoisted himself over the top of the ladder. "I think you have more room here than is available below," he observed thoughtfully. "I think that I shall join you here for the night."

The companions of Her Majesty giggled their delight and the Queen blushed unattractively.

Louis dismissed the men below and, as the lanterns and torchers were again put out, the King settled into the warm hay between the Queen and Athenais.

Athenais made a move to gather her belongings.

"Where are you going, Madame?" the King inquired politely.

"I thought I should move to another part of the loft, Sire," she answered.

"I would not have you so disturbed. Please, feel free to resume your place."

Sitting down again, she watched him covertly. He had removed the soft brown jacket. He did not, in these surroundings, wear the elaborately decorative attire which was his habit at his palaces. Now, in his lawn shirt, its buttons opened at the throat to reveal the tanned skin and the full sleeves pushed up past muscular forearms, he looked more masculine and perhaps more human than the gilded, bejeweled King who ruled at Versailles. His discarded boots teetered dangerously near the edge threatening those who lay beneath. At last he lay back in the fragrant hay, carefully facing his wife, while Athenais snuggled in behind him close enough that she could feel the heat emanating from his body.

It must have been much later, although how much she had no way of knowing, when Athenais was slowly

awakened from her slumber. All around her the deep, even breathing mingled with a few ragged snores; the Court of France was asleep.

Not all asleep, however. In her drowsy state she was aware of a body close to her own. A stealthy hand had crept its way around her waist amid the fluffy profusion of ruffles on her pettiocats, and now lay tantalizingly against the skin of her back. As she came more awake, Athenais felt a loathing come over her. The practices of the King's brother who was interested only in handsome young men, was not limited to the male members of the Court. It was known that some of the ladies cast covetous eyes on the Mesdames of the Court. In this loft of women, Athenais was sure she had become an unwilling part of such an entanglement. Cautiously she moved away from the person only to have the arm and hand draw her nearer. Not wishing to wake anyone, she reached out a hand to push the person away and gasped as her hand came into contact with a hard, hairy, and decidedly masculine chest.

As her eyes became accustomed to the dim moonlight filtering through the warped roof, she strained to see the face of the King who held her in such a deliciously forbidden embrace. He was sleeping! In amazement she confirmed by listening to his slow, even breathing that Louis was indeed fast asleep. For a moment she toyed with the idea of merely snuggling closer to him, if only for a moment, but rejected the notion. It would be too easy to fall asleep herself and then what a pretty picture they'd present in the dawn! The King and the Queen's favorite lady sleeping in a blissful embrace behind Her Majesty's very back! A giggle escaped her as the picture formed in her mind and Louis stirred. Sleepy blue eyes opened in the shadowy illumination of the loft and Athenais reached cautious fingers toward his cheek.

No words were spoken, not that any were necessary. They lay together for a moment, still and quiet, each loathe to destroy the comfort and feeling between them.

"Athenais." The word formed on his lips and she was never sure whether he'd actually spoken it or merely let her see it there.

She hesitated. "Louis," she returned; the enormity of the fact that this was no ordinary man to whom she was speaking but a king made the word seem unreal. Never, in all the years she had been at Court, had she heard anyone call him by his Christian name, not even the Queen. And yet here, in an abandoned hayloft, it seemed corrected and even required. To her surprise, it seemed right to the King, too.

In the cool darkness of the loft, with the Queen near and a number of ladies of the Court slumbering unsuspectingly around them, Athenais and the King shared their first kiss. It was restrained, carefully controlled for, in light of their dangerous surroundings they could not allow their emotions to override their caution. As yet it seemed to Athenais to be a revelation. Long after Louis had reluctantly turned back to the Queen and his breathing had settled back into the rhythmic patterns of sleep, Athenais lay awake, venturning now and then to lightly touch the King who now seemed to her less a king and more a man.

* * *

Lille lay before them under siege. The Court approached the French encampment along a muddy road, a torrential rainstorm beating against the carriages and drenching the horses and riders. Athenais didn't mind the rain, she probably wouldn't have minded any problem that might have arisen. To her the world that day

was a wonderful place and even the prattling complaints of the Queen could not change her mood.

At last they neared the encampment outside the city; the rain stopped. Athenais raised the curtains on the windows just as a hue and cry passed from one carriage to another in the procession.

"What is it?" she called to a passing horseman.

"A coach, crossing the fields," he raised his arm and pointed.

There, rumbling madly across the rocky field, was a coach pulled by six charging horses. It was obvious that the animals had been driven so for a long while and they appeared as though momentum alone was carrying them along. It seemed, as the vehicle hit one hole, rut, and rock after another that it must surely fly apart and the occupants be killed. The slow-moving procession stopped to watch as the coach moved past them toward the encampment where the King had arrived earlier. Occupants of the carriages in the procession hung from the windows to stare at the intruder and, just as the Queen roused herself to loo, Athenais recognized the carriage.

"My God!" she cried, unmindful of her royal companion, "It's La Vallière!"

The word spread quickly, La Vallière was rejoining the King, the favorite was arriving. Amusement and indignation were apparent and only Athenais and the Queen seemed horrified at this turn of events.

With rare presence of mind, the Queen gave orders that La Vallière's carriage be stopped and that her own be driven as quickly as possible to the King. "She will make His Majesty a laughing stock!" The Queen's respect for royal dignity could not stand the idea of a mistress arriving so haphazardly in the middle of a military encampment.

For Athenais's part, she was no less anxious that

Louise be stopped although her reason had nothing to do with royal dignity. A fear gripped her that Louis, for some reason, had sent for Louise, that he had found her lacking in some quality possessed by the former favorite.

The Queen's carriage arrived at the encampment just as La Vallière, whose coachman has resisted all efforts of the Queen's messenger to stop him, alighted from her coach and started toward the inn where the King had set up his offices.

"I will stop her!" Athenais told the Queen and, receiving the royal permission, she leapt from the carriage and followed Louise.

She could not, however, overcome La Vallière's advantage. She reached the top of the stairs where, she had been told, the King was. Having mounted the stairs as quickly as her skirts would allow, Athenais did not stop to think about what she would say to explain her presence if she found herself in the center of a tender reunion. She refused to allow such possibility to enter her mind.

She paused at the top of the stairs, a pain sharp and stabbing, tearing at her side, forced her to draw several deep, coarse breaths. At last she continued toward the door of His Majesty's room and, reaching it, pushed it open.

Neither of the room's two occupants noticed her. The narrow windows, dirty and cracked, admitted a minimum of the bright afternoon sunlight. The room, apparently the finest the inn had to offer, was nevertheless unfit for the King of France. Its furniture, far from being the delicate, graceful style now in vogue, reflected an age long past; it was massive and gloomy. The green bedhangings were surely many shades darker than their original color; grime and age had done their

work well. A desk, covered with maps and reports testified, by its ink-spattered appearance, to many users. The few chairs in the room were worn, some splintered, all with threadbare upholstery. Athenais's eyes skimmed these details as a matter of course, as merely a frame for the picture before her.

Louis XIV stood in the center of the room. His clothing bore signs of the bad weather of the morning by the many mudstains. His high boots were thickly encrusted with the mud of the French encampment. Before him, kneeling pitifully, was Louise de la Baume Le Blanc de la Vallière, Duchesse de Vaujours, a broken woman old beyond her twenty-three years. Athenais was shocked at the appearance of Louise. She was pregnant but so thin that her pregnancy seemed merely an illusion created by her gown. Her blonde hair was beginning to show grey strands and her eyes seemed sunken and dark.

Athenais stood in the half-open doorway, fascinated by the scene. Louise was sobbing openly and the King, for after one look Athenais could not associate this pillar of icy majesty with Louis of the night before, stood coldly oblivious to her tears. The silence in the room was broken only by Louise until the King spoke.

"Madame," his voice and tone were impersonal. "I dislike having my hand forced."

Louise looked as though she were mad, as though his words had driven the sanity from her mind. "I had to come," she cried, "I couldn't stay at Versailles while you betrayed me!"

She knew! Athenais's mind raced back to the incident when Madame de Sévigné had found them together in the bower. So it was Louise she had been writing to, she was sure of it! As the realization struck her, Athenais leaned more heavily on the door and it opened with a

loud groan. The occupants of the room started and Louise stared at her disbelievingly.

"Yes, you!" She started toward Athenais. "You betrayed me! You used me! I hate you!" Her thin body shook with anger.

"Madame!" The King's voice rang through the room freezing Louise where she stood. "I will not suffer you and your ridiculous fantasies any longer." He motioned Athenais into the room and, with one powerful hand gripping La Vallière's emaciated arm unmercifully pulled her from the room.

Athenais went to the window and scrubbed at the dirt. Below, in the courtyard, the ladies and gentlemen of Their Majesties' entourages stood discussing the latest gossip. Louise's words rang in her ears and a wave of self-pity swept over her while tears began to course down her cheeks. She leaned her forehead against the window and so missed seeing a broken and sobbing woman escorted back to her carriage and turned back toward Versailles. Louis had ordered that she not be allowed to converse with any of the curious onlookers.

Behind Athenais, without her realizing it, Louis had entered the room once more. He approached her quietly. "You should rejoin the Queen," he told her gently.

She turned to face him, making an effort to quell the tears. "Yes," she agreed. "I suppose I should."

Louis pulled an immaculate square of lawn edged with lace from an inside pocket of his coat and dabbed at her tears. "I would you hadn't seen that outburst."

"She hates me so," Athenais's voice trembled. "She makes me feel so hateful."

"Nonsense." Louis pulled her into his arms. "She hates everyone. She cannot accept the inevitable."

Athenais leaned her face against his chest until her tears stopped and she regained her composure. "I have

soaked your shirt," she smiled, dabbing at the wet place near his shoulder in the same manner as he had when attempting to dry her tears.

"Never mind," he told her, taking the handkerchief from her.

They stood for a moment silently. Athenais knew that, under other circumstances they might have been sharing kisses far more satisfying than the night before in the loft but, for now at least, another stood between them—Louise.

Louis stared out through the little hole Athenais had scrubbed in the window grime.

"I suppose I should try to find Pardaillan," Athenais said at last. Her husband's regiment was taking part in the siege of Lille.

"He is not here," Louis answered, not yet taking his eyes from the window.

"His regiment was to be at Lille."

"I sent them to Douai. I ordered it yesterday."

Athenais gave him an astonished glance but Louis did not meet her eyes. He stared placidly at the French trenches and war machines in the distance, his carefully controlled features betraying not the slightest hint that the sudden departure of her husband had been anything but a routine military maneuver.

At that moment, Louvois, Louis's Minister of War, a rather handsome young man only slightly older than Athenais and slightly younger than the King, entered the room. He scowled to find her there even though he had no quarrel with Athenais herself. To his way of thinking, women had no place on a military campaign where they were generally a nuisance. "Excuse me, Sire," he began, nodding politely to Athenais, "we believe the town is about to surrender."

A few moments later, Athenais found herself in the

courtyard once more ignoring those courtiers who would have discussed La Vallière's sudden arrival and no less sudden departure. She was hailed by the Queen.

"Madame!" The Queen was enjoying a cup of her never-ending chocolate.

"Yes, Your Majesty." Athenais approached her wearily.

"I am afraid you will have to fend for yourself tonight. Other ladies have joined me who have precedence over you—you understand."

"Of course." It was just as well, Athenais thought, she didn't need another night of the Queen's insipid conversation. So now she needed a place to sleep.

"Madame?" Athenais's maid, Madelon, who had been relegated to a rickety carriage somewhere near the end of the procession and of whom Athenais had seen little the past few days, joined her.

"Madelon, how are you fending for yourself?"

"I manage," the young woman shrugged, "There are plenty of men who can be very accommodating—footmen, valets, even a Marquis, Duc, or Prince now and again."

"Well, I need a place to sleep tonight, Athenais sighed.

"I don't!" Madelon smiled mischievously, indicating that she'd found a companion for the night. "I know of a place, though, if no one has taken it yet."

"Where?"

"It's very small, a tiny storage building, filled with hay." Madelon was already starting off in the direction of the inn's outbuildings.

The building was indeed very small, no more than an enclosed bin for the storage of the inn's supply of hay. The floor space was scarcely large enough for one person and the rest of the area was taken up with the hay-filled bin.

“Hardly the King’s apartment at Versailles,” Madelon shrugged, “but better than sharing a stall with a horse.”

Athenais agreed and offered to share the building with Madelon. Her maid declined, her companion for the night, she assured Athenais, was much more interesting.

Left alone in the gathering darkness, Athenais took a trunk of her belongings from a footman directed to her by Madelon. She secured the door against intrusion and dug out through her trunk, extracting a little bag of candles. With a rueful glance at the dry hay surrounding her, she replaced the candles. At last she drew out a fine lawn and lace nightgown; it would be good to remove her clothing and slip into the clean, perfumed garment. As the darkness became more complete, she clambered into the soft, deep pile of hay and drew a light cloak over herself. Soft evening breezes filtered in through the walls and the sound of crickets and nightbirds filled the air.

“War is much quieter than I imagined,” she mused drowsily to herself.

In the distance the inn settled around its occupants. All around her the gentlemen and ladies were getting much needed sleep. The barns were full, coaches were occupied, the inn itself was filled to overflowing, and Athenais luxuriated in her bin of hay.

She was just falling off to sleep when she became aware of footsteps approaching her refuge. A light knock sounded on the door. “Go away!” she called sharply, “I found it first!” The knock sounded again and Athenais sat up in the hay. “Who is it?”

“It is Bontemps, Madame,” a disembodied voice told her.

Athenais recognized the name of the King’s chief *valet-de-chambre*. It must be a message from Louis!

Hurriedly she climbed out of the hay, running her fingers through her hair to remove stray wisps clinging to her. Opening the door slightly she saw the figure of Bontemps, a tiny, older gentleman, imperturbable and impeccably polite. "What is it, Monsieur Bontemps, do you have a message for me?"

"Are you alone, Madame?" he asked.

"Yes, I am alone."

From behind the little man, Louis's voice came to her, "And extremely difficult to find!"

Bontemps melted away from the doorway to be replaced by the figure of the King. He was dressed in black from the hat which hid his features to his shoes, devoid of any ostentatious decoration. Only when the hat was removed and the moonlight lit his features could Athenais assure herself that it was not all merely an illusion. She stepped back.

Inside, Louis secured the door once more and turned to Athenais. The bright moonlight filtered through the walls between loosely joined boards, gleaming on their hair and casting an ethereal glow on their features. Neither spoke for a moment, the knowledge that they were about to fulfill the promise of the past days lay heavily between them. At last Louis drew her to him and drove all doubt from her mind with a kiss as different from the one in the loft as autumn is different from spring. He lifted her easily into the hay bin and, casting aside his somber black garments, joined her there.

"Athenais," his voice was soft, filled with a tenderness she thought she would never hear from him, "how long I've waited."

"Louis," she returned, thrilling to his touches, "and I."

They were merged into a mutual longing, willingly yielding each to the other, enslaved by the passion which

had existed between them since before either had recognized its presence. They spent the night fitfully, waking and sleeping, never losing touch with each other if only in the intertwining of outstretched fingertips. It seemed only a moment before Bontemps was tapping lightly at the door once more.

"I must go," Louis murmured, making no effort to move.

"Yes," Athenais agreed without releasing the hold she kept around his shoulders.

With a shared sigh, the King rose, and dressed quickly. After a last, lingering kiss, he was gone back toward the inn where, in less than an hour, he would be found snugly in his bed awaiting the help of his courtiers in dressing for the day.

Behind, Athenais lay dreamily in her burrow of hay. The King had come to her! He had sought her out! As waves of exhaustion swept over her she thought not of the difficult road she had traveled to reach this point in her life, not of an abandoned Louise somewhere between Lille and Versailles, but of the golden path which lay before her when none would stand before her in the heart of the King.

Chapter V

Versailles in the spring. Even Athenais, who preferred Saint-Germain or Fountainbleau, had to admit that it was beautiful. The gardeners had worked like madmen laying out gardens and shrubbery, bringing flowers already blossomed, out of the vast hothouses for the walks and beds. And how could a spring be anything but beautiful when you were young, lovely, and loved by the most powerful king in the world.

Louis strolled through the gardens behind his ever-expanding palace of Versailles. The gravel paths, so carefully raked and leveled, crunched beneath satin slippers and high-heeled shoes. To his right, a clinging Louise de La Vallière hung on his every word and, to his left, Athenais sparkled and bubbled like one of his fountains. The comparison was as cruel as it was pathetic.

They were walking away from the back of the palace, approaching the Latona fountain. It was one of the King's favorites. As he reached it, he turned and awaited the arrival of the group of courtiers following behind.

"Latona." The King paused until all conversation had ceased. "Latona, the mistress of Jupiter, stopped by a pool to quench her thirst. A group of ignorant people began to harass her, throwing stones and clods of

earth. She prayed to her mighty lover for assistance and he transformed her tormentors into croaking frogs.” With a wave of his hand he indicated the sculptures of angry rustics, some already turned into frogs, some midway through the metamorphosis. “A lesson can be learned from this; a lesson of the deserved fate of those who do not feel it their due to show respect to the loved ones of kings.” He looked pointedly over his assembled nobles while they tried to show that they understood, and agreed with, the subtle warning.

Athenais turned suddenly toward the fountain to hide her smile, and Louise blushed in that maddeningly embarrassed way of hers. She had been delivered of her child, a boy, Louis—Comte de Vermandois, soon after the Court returned from Flanders. He was, to Louise, the ultimate reminder of the King’s fading affection and whenever the child was mentioned she would redden and dissolve into tears. It was, Athenais was certain, one of the leading factors in her downfall. The King was surrounded all day by those with problems and demands, the last thing he needed was a mistress who met him with tears and complaints. It was a mistake she was careful not to repeat and her efforts were being rewarded.

But even here, in this budding paradise bathed in the spring sunshine, there was a cloud which denied her complete happiness. The Marquis de Montespan.

Athenais had been worried lest the presence of a jealous husband should hamper the strengthening of her relationship with the King. And, not only was Par-daillian jealous, he was fanatically moral. She had long since lost count of the times she’d heard him rage of the “disgusting liaison” between the King and La Vallière. She knew that he would consider a royal mistress in his family a calamity, a shaming of his family name. She

dreaded his learning of her affair with Louis. But her luck was holding. Soon, very soon after their return from Flanders, Pardaillan had fallen heir to an estate in Provence. He had urged her to accompany him there but, pleading her duties to the Queen, she remained and he left alone. Since his departure she'd received a constant stream of letters. Coaxing, cajoling, pleading, he tried to convince her to join him. She ignored them all. With scant patience she explained again and yet again of the necessity of her remaining at Court. He tried to bargain with her. If she would leave the Court for five or six years to be with him, he would then, he promised, agree to return to Versailles for the rest of their lives. That letter had sent her into gales of laughter. She smiled again now, remembering. Leave the Court for five or six yers! Now, when all her efforts were paying off? When everything of which she'd dreamed for years was about to come to her? No. She was happy with Pardaillan gone. She could blossom out of his restricting shade.

And blossom she had. She glittered during the day; none of the ladies of the Court could hope to shine brighter than she. She glittered at night when the jewels in her hair and studding on her gown matched the radiant lights in her eyes. When she entered a room all eyes followed her, all ears strained to hear her words, the high and the mighty of the Court jostled one another for her smiles. But no attention from the Court, no respectful words from formerly unfriendly lips, no amount of grudging admiration could give her the satisfaction she received from the sight of Louis XIV, King of France and Navarre, racking his brain to find new ways to please her, greater gifts to give her, worried at her slightest frown, pleased with her amusement. Leave the Court indeed!

She returned from the promenade in the gardens and climbed the broad staircase to her rooms. She'd long since moved out of the cramped quarters of her husband, but was still relegated to the upper recesses of the palace. The time was not right, Louis had told her, to move into a more splendid suite nearer his own. Louise de La Vallière still occupied her beautiful apartment and this was a sharp splinter in her otherwise untroubled existence.

Entering her suite, three rooms and a tiny bath chamber, she pouted. The furniture was new, the hangings lovely, but it was hardly the setting for the beloved of a king.

"I don't know why I have to live like this!" she complained to Madelon after her other maids had gone.

Madelon remembered other apartments they'd shared as well as the drafty castle in Poitou where they'd played as children. "They seem beautiful to me," she shrugged as the brush in her hand stroked through Athenais's bouncy curls.

"Oh yes, they're beautiful enough—" Athenais paused, "if you happen to be just anyone. But I am not just anyone! La Vallière retains her apartment and she is not even his mistress any longer!" She drew away from Madelon and rose from her dressing table to cross the room. "I wish there needn't be so much secrecy," she told the maid as she reclined on an elegant little sofa. "I'll be glad when this is all out in the open!" She remembered Louis's lectures about the scandal their double adultery would cause and the hue and cry it would raise among the clergy. They had to meet secretly, each retiring to his own apartment and then traveling through a hidden passage in the walls; or else arrive at La Vallière's apartment as they had so often in the past and then retire to Louise's bedchamber while

the former favorite pouted in an antechamber.

"What difference does it make as long as the King loves you?" Madelon philosophized.

Athenais played with the wide lace ruffle of her new silk dressing gown. "It makes a difference to me!" she cried. "Besides, everyone knows that Louise isn't his mistress anymore, and anyone with half a brain could see who is!"

The Queen and your husband don't know."

Athenais smiled unpleasantly, "I said with half a brain! Pardaillan doesn't want to know. As for the Queen," she rolled her eyes, "I think she's grown more stupid over the years, as though that were possible! As long as she gets her cup of chocolate and has those beastly little dwarfs around her she's happy as can be!"

Madelon changed the subject, "Did you get the letter on the table?"

"No, what letter?"

Athenais grimaced when she looked at the sealed document Madelon retrieved from the anteroom. "Another message from Pardaillan! More lovesick pleadings I suppose." Her eyes skimmed the page and the more she read, the angrier she became. "He can't do this!" she exclaimed, rising to pace the room. "He can't dare do this!"

Seeing curiosity plain on Madelon's face, Athenais waved the offending letter violently. "He threatens, *threatens*, to return to court and expose my 'sin' to the world! He wants me to send him our son," she paused. "Where is he, by the way? Still a page to the Comte de Beaumont I suppose." She didn't wait for an answer. "He says that he doesn't want his son contaminated by contact with me! He says that he will have me locked up in a convent! I'll kill him, by God, I will!"

She ranted and raved all afternoon and Madelon

deposited the letter in a hiding place to prevent its destruction. At last, worn out by her own emotions, Athenais fell asleep.

When she awoke the room was dim, lit by a single candle. "Madelon! What time is it!?"

"Eight o'clock," Madelon answered.

"Why didn't you wake me?" She sat up in bed and then fell back with a groan, her head throbbing. As her eyes scanned the shadowy room, she saw her gown and accessories carefully set out. "I have to go to the King!" she insisted, trying to convince herself to get up.

She suffered Madelon's foul-tasting headache cure and soon felt well enough to make her preparations for the evening for which she was already late.

By the time she reached the King's apartment, the company was already at the gaming tables. Restraint thrown to the winds, they moaned, screamed, and tore their hair over reverses in luck. Several courtiers inquired as to the reason for her tardiness and to them she pleaded her headache.

She passed the time with La Vallière and a few others, taking care to avoid the King which, as she knew it would, attracted his attention. At last she allowed herself to be placed at a card table with Louise and the Queen. The King joined them, standing behind Athenais's chair. He offered his assistance which she accepted with an air of apathy and, though the King endeavored to help her, she played badly and lost a great deal of his money.

"I'm sorry; I must leave," she said at last. "My mind seems to be elsewhere tonight." Taking her leave of the Queen and King, Athenais coaxed Louise, who until now had been a spectator, into taking her cards, and left the group to retire to a window seat far away from the crowds.

From her new vantage point, Athenais could see Louis extending his advice to Louise. Now, however, every few moments his attention was turned in her direction. At these times, Athenais would fan herself languidly and gaze through the window into the scantily illuminated night of the courtyards in front of the palace.

"Athenais?" the King's voice came from behind her.

"Yes?" She made as if to rise but was stopped by a gesture of his hand. Past him, she could see the discomfiture of Louise, glancing unhappily in their direction, and the Queen, obviously enjoying Louise's unhappiness.

"What is wrong with you tonight?" Louis asked.

"I am worried," she said simply.

"What can be worrying you?" He seemed astonished.

"I received a letter today—from Pardaillan." The King made a deprecatory gesture but she continued, "It's not like the other, Louis. He threatens me."

"Threatens?" A cynical smile lit the King's features, "Don't you find that funny?"

Athenais refused to be drawn into his self-confident indifference, "No, I don't find that funny! You should read his letter!"

Louis opened his mouth to speak but, with a gesture, Athenais silenced him. Casually, members of the Court were attempting to drift nearer them, the earnestness of their faces and apparent gravity of their conversation had piqued many curiosities.

"We had better not continue this here," Athenais cautioned him. "I'll retire to my rooms and you can follow a little later."

He agreed and, painting a pained expression across her features, she rose and made her way across the room to take her leave of the Queen.

"Help me change!" she called as she entered her rooms, "Hurry!" Young women scurried about with cases for her jewels and waited to receive her discarded gown and petticoats. They worked with efficient speed and soon Athenais and Madelon sat alone in her resplendent bedchamber. Madelon brushed Athenais's hair into the loose waves so much more becoming than her elaborately curled coiffures, and Athenais closed her eyes, savoring the gentle, relaxing strokes of the brush.

"When is he coming?" Madelon asked.

"Soon, as soon as he can get away," Athenais answered wearily. The strain was beginning to tell on her nerves.

A few moments later, while Athenais stood restlessly before one of the windows, a light tap sounded followed by the almost imperceptible click of the hidden panel which opened into a tiny corridor and to the King's bedchamber. The King, divested of his coat and cravat, entered the room and Athenais, framed by the window, turned toward him.

Without a word she picked up the letter from the dressing table where Madelon, having retrieved it from its hiding place, had left it. She handed it to him.

Louis sat on a sofa in the light of a candelabrum on a nearby table. His eyes scanned the page and the play of emotions on his face changed from amazement to exasperation to anger before Athenais's eyes. After what seemed an eternity, he met her gaze. "Your husband is mad."

"Exactly," Athenais agreed. "That is precisely what makes him think he can carry out his threats."

"Perhaps it would be better for you to surrender your son to him. He is of no practical use to you and it could even be more convenient with him away."

"No!" She was adamant. "If I bow to this whim of

his, what other demands might he not make?"

"But the child may become a symbol to him, a focal point for his delusions."

"Then why subject the child to his ravings?"

Louis shrugged, the child was Athenais's and he did not particularly care what she did with him. "Well . . ." he considered the matter. "We have no choice but to leave the next step to him. We must see how far he is willing to carry this matter."

Athenais could not resign herself to the waiting so easily and she sensed that the King enjoyed seeing his supremely confident mistress in a state of anxiety, bringing her problems to him. Moving away from the window, she joined him on the sofa. The soft glow of the candles sent feathery patterns across her skin from the marabou trimming on her pink gown. "Why do others have to try to come between us?" she asked him seriously.

"Jealousy, malice," his tone was matter-of-fact, "boredom. In your case I'd say jealousy was the motive. If I were your husband I'd want to take you away from Court."

Athenais smiled at him through the heavy fringe of her lashes, "If you were my husband I wouldn't mind going away from Court."

Louis smiled at her fondly. A master of every situation, renowned for his self-control, and generally immune to the usual brand of Court flattery, he could still be moved by a beautiful woman whom he loved and whom he at least believed loved him in return. "Unfortunately, that is not the case. There must be a way to distract your husband, as well as the rest of the Court. I think, my dear, that you should have a love affair."

"I thought I was," she returned.

"Ah, but this one would be more public."

Athenais did not like the idea but allowed herself to be convinced. "It must be someone believable," she told him. "After all, it would not be practical to have the Court believe I am in love with someone unattractive, or without a sense of humor. And of course he must be wealthy and not without prestige."

"I am beginning to dislike this scheme," Louis said suddenly, and the concern on his face made her laugh.

"No, it's a good idea, and you need not look so worried. I've no interest in anyone except you." She nuzzled her head against his chest, the embroidery on his long waistcoat scratching her cheek lightly. "I wonder whom we should consider," she mused aloud.

"It should be someone you know, not a new acquaintance," the King decided. "If you were to take up with someone absolutely new to you it might look too contrived."

"Someone I know—someone handsome—with a sense of humor. Athenais ran a list of her male friends through her mind, "I think I know "

* * *

Penguilin de Lauzun stood in Athenais's bedchamber facing her. "An affair!" he laughed, "But my pet, I thought you were occupied elsewhere."

"It wouldn't be a real affair, Peguilin," she assured him quickly. The Duc didn't know that Louis had hidden himself behind the window drapes. "It is only to mask my—er—true affections for another gentleman from my husband."

"Your husband, there's a gentleman to be reckoned with." The Duc de Lauzun and the Marquis de

Montespan, having grown up in close proximity, were well acquainted and Peguillin was familiar with Par-daillan's quick rages. "I don't know that I'm willing to face him to convenience you."

"You wouldn't only be conveniencing me," she said, pouting that he should be reluctant to please her. "You would also be pleasing another, who could be very grateful." She raised her eyebrows to indicate that Lauzun would indeed be well rewarded.

"And would you also be grateful?" he joined her on the sofa.

"If I could. However, as I said before, my affections are elsewhere." Athenais, her back to the window, rolled her eyes toward the drapes.

Peguillin's wink told her he understood. "Ah, well, more's the pity. I think, my lovely Athenais, that I would be willing to oblige you and your mysterious gentleman, and be discreet about it if only . . ." he paused as though greatly troubled.

"If only what?" Athenais prompted.

"If only I could be sure that His Majesty would not disapprove of such an arrangement."

At those words, the King revealed himself to the Duc who feigned great surprise and the bargain was sealed over wine.

* * *

In the following days, it was noted that Madame de Montespan was carrying on scandalously with the Duc de Lauzun. The Court buzzed with news of the affair. The King, who bore the public attentions of La Vallière with a resigned but melancholy air, began to wish he had never suggested the arrangement.

When he joined Athenais in her gorgeous bed-

chamber he often began their afternoon together with complaints. "Your affection for the Duc seems excessive," he told her.

"It was your idea to attempt the masquerade," she retorted.

"But you carry on so, like lovers."

"Isn't that everyone is supposed to think we are?"

"But I am beginning to think so, too."

"Oh, Louis!" She felt the easily controlled tears begin to course down her cheeks. Guiltily, his complaints turned to words of comfort and the discussion came to an end in the great, curtained four-poster.

Outside it had begun to rain and flashes of lightning bathed the room in pink light, but neither the threat of scandal within the palace nor the fury of nature without could come between them at that moment.

Chapter VI

The storm, still raging outside, had awakened Athenais. It was early, she wouldn't have anything to occupy her time until much later, after the King returned from chapel. Lying on her bed, staring at the tester above, Athenais was seized with an uncontrollable desire to see first hand the ceremony attending his Majesty's levée to which no woman, save Madame Hamelin, the King's former wet nurse, was ever admitted.

Slipping into her dressing gown, she took a candle from a table and, going to the panel which was covered by a tapestry, touched the hidden lever and slipped through the secret doorway. The passages, hidden and unknown to so many at Versailles, were deserted at this early hour as she knew they would be. Walking swiftly, she passed through the now-familiar corridors, so small and low, different from the high, grand, marbled halls of the outer palace. Many corridors led from this, the main passage, stretching off into the darkness. She shuddered and passed them quickly. She had no desire to explore their depths today, and alone.

Navigating the various twists, turns, and stairways of the corridor, Athenais thought of the many courtiers whose rooms lay beyond the other secret panels in the hall. Most had no inkling that their every move, every

conversation could be, and often was, noted by the inhabitants of this hidden kingdom within a kingdom.

At last, the door to Louis's bedchamber stood before her. Listening breathlessly, she waited for a moment when the soft click of the latch would be inaudible to those in the room. Extinguishing the candle, she stepped through the doorway.

Disappointed, she saw that she had missed the greater part of the ceremony. Louis, already massaged with spirits and dressed for the morning, sat in a chair waiting to be shaved. His courtiers stood around him and the King himself watched the barber's preparations in a mirror held by his valet, Bontemps. Athenais held her breath. The company stood not far from her own vantage point. She feared that her slightest movement would bring discovery. At last, gathering her courage about her, she ventured to peek around the tapestry once more.

Louis was being shaved, his long, flowing curls brushed away from his face. The barber evidently knew his business well for he approached his royal client with a confidence born of long years of work. The courtiers ranged themselves to either side of the King, busily competing for the honor of being deemed more witty than the others.

Gaining confidence, Athenais leaned further out from behind the tapestry and caught her breath when she glanced into the mirror. Tilted toward the King whose back was toward her, she was reflected in the mirror plainly. She saw the King glance toward her reflection once, and then again and smile as though at some private joke. At that moment, mercifully, the barber finished and the mirror was lowered. Athenais hid behind the tapestry once more and caught her breath in quick, shallow gasps.

The room fell silent as the King knelt beside his bed to say his prayers. The clergy surrounded him and the ever-present courtiers stood at a respectful distance.

Athenais, afraid to touch the latch or even move in the quiet room, stood behind the tapestry as Louis entreated God to help him govern the nation. She thought she would suffocate, the close warm air of the room was compounded by the weight of the tapestry and the small space in which she stood.

His prayers over, the King's breakfast was brought to him. As usual, it consisted of bread and wine. An expectant hush fell over the room as Louis sat behind a small, but exquisite table. He paused, Athenais held her breath. Was she to be exposed? The King regarded the assembly of courtiers and his warm, deep voice broke the silence. "I wish to breakfast privately this morning."

The courtiers remained in their places—was this not private?

"I wish," the King repeated, a bit more forcefully, "to be alone."

Immediately the courtiers began to leave the chamber, aware that any hesitation was likely to bring a displeased frown in their direction. The last of the nobles left the room, trailed by the clergy, and Bon-temps closed the door behind himself, the last to leave.

Athenais turned for the hidden panel and froze as she heard the sharp retort of wooden heels crossing the floor. The tapestry was flung back and the King stood before her.

Athenais dropped him a curtsy as grand as the small space and her dressing gown would allow.

"Are you a spy?" he asked, a twinkle in his eyes.

"Indeed I am!" Athenais replied, her composure recovered. "I've come to investigate the mysteries of the King's levée."

"And what have you decided?"

"That I am thankful to not have a pack of nobles eager to watch my morning preparations!"

Louis laughed, "I would be happy to watch them. Are you thinking of having a levée of your own?"

She smiled into his eyes, "Perhaps. But only the highest in the land would be permitted to attend."

She was aware of the warmth, increasing with his presence. "May I step into the room, *mon cher*? It is intolerably hot back here!"

Louis stepped aside and Athenais entered the room. "Do not let me keep you from your breakfast," she told him. Stepping across the room she passed the gilded balustrade encircling the royal bed and, discarding her satin and marabou slippers, she slipped beneath the coverlet which was still warm from his body.

Louis reclined in his chair, munching the bread and sipping his wine. "Are you hungry?" he asked.

Athenais shook her head. She leaned back against the satin pillows edged with lace into which was woven the coats of arms of the King's estates.

He sat quietly, watching her for a moment and then, rising from his chair, crossed the room and sat on the edge of the bed beside her. "You should not have come through the passages alone."

"I was not afraid," she assured him.

"No, I don't suppose you were."

"At any rate, I must return through the corridors to get back to my chambers."

Louis shook his head, "I will have Bontemps accompany you."

Through the door they could hear the impatient stampings of the courtiers' wooden heels on the rich parquet floor of the anteroom.

"You must leave soon," the King sighed, reluctance plain on his face.

"I suppose," she agreed. The King bent over her, his soft curls tickled the exposed skin of her throat and shoulders and she felt a familiar shudder of apprehension run through her as their lips met. She touched the smooth, scented skin of his freshly shaven cheek and heard a low moan of scarcely repressed passion start deep in his throat.

He moved away from her and his knuckles brushed her breast as he drew her dressing gown closed. "Athenais, why must you do this?" he breathed wistfully. "You know I have a long morning of council meetings before me. Do you imagine I will be able to govern wisely with this picture in my mind?"

She giggled softly and slipped from beneath the coverlet. "I am sorry, my darling, but I didn't want you to forget me."

"And did you think that to be possible?"

She pouted prettily, "Perhaps."

They recrossed the room. Bending, Louis kissed her once more and held the tapestry aside as she stepped through the opening in the wall. "I shall send Bontemps to you immediately," he promised.

The panel closed and she heard Louis cross the room to the anteroom door. True to his word, the panel opened and Bontemps joined her just a few seconds before she heard the courtiers troop into the room. Apparently, Louis had admitted his valet before the rest. She could imagine their puzzlement when they noticed the King's scarcely touched breakfast.

"Good morning, Madame," the old valet smiled.

Athenais wondered if anything could rouse the aged man from his constant state of composure. "Good morning, Monsieur Bontemps," she smiled. "I am sorry to force you on this journey, but His Majesty insisted."

"It is my pleasure," he insisted, ushering her through the hidden passages as grandly as if he were showing her the gardens of Saint-Germain.

Unerringly, for Bontemps knew the floor plan of this secret world better than the architects whose creation it was, they arrived at the panel of Athenais's room. Handing her a candle, Bontemps touched the latch and held the door wide as she stepped into her chamber. Bidding her a pleasant *adieu*, the panel closed and he was gone. He would enter one of the empty rooms of state and arrive at his master's chamber by way of the outer, public corridors, leaving the courtiers to their speculations.

Athenais lay back in her own bed once again. She was certain that, as soon as his schedule permitted, Louis would join her. It was still raining, but that would work in her favor by discouraging a hunt or promenade in the gardens.

Impulsively, she called for Madelon and her maids. The King would be coming early today she was sure, and she wanted to be ready.

"Yes, Madame?" Marielle, one of Athenais's maids, answered her call.

"Have a tub filled with water," she instructed, "I wish to have a bath."

A heavy marble tub was carried into her bedroom. The footmen grumbled, wondering why, when the tub had a place of its own in the little bathroom of the suite and could be emptied so much easier there, she had to have it in her bedroom.

Drowsing in the warm, perfumed water, Athenais barely heard a maid admit Peguillin de Lauzun to her antechamber.

"He wants to come in?" she asked the maid. "Oh, all right but toss my gown here, over the tub."

As the Duc entered the room, Athenais smiled and held out a wet hand for him to kiss. "Forgive me if I don't get up," she said as Lauzun dragged a chair across the room to the foot of the tub. She resumed her bath, a dressing gown draped across the bottom two-thirds of the tub concealed her completely from the waist down but not at all from the waist up. Peguillin, however, had been her lover years before and she felt comfortable with him in the room.

"Well, how goes our torrid affair?" she asked.

"I don't think many people believe it."

"No, I don't suppose they do," Athenais agreed, admiring a soapy arm, "but it's what the King wants."

"How long do you think it's going to go on?" he asked.

"I don't know, why?"

"I just wondered."

"Peguillin," Athenais smiled. "Have you got someone you want to have a real affair with?" The Duc was noncommittal but she kept at him. "Tell me, Peguillin." She flipped some soapy water at him, "Tell me."

Their talk degenerated quickly into a water fight, Athenais the better off because she had no satin suit to be spotted and ruined by the water. Peguillin took a pail of warm water, left by one of the maids, and held it over her head where Madelon had secured Athenais's hair to keep it dry. While Athenais held her arms over her head to protect her hair, Peguillin tilted the pail slowly, laughing at her protests.

With Athenais squealing and Peguillin laughing, neither heard the click of the hidden panel's latch, or saw the King step into the room behind them.

"Monsieur!" His voice rang out accompanied by the sharp crack of his tall ebony cane against the floor.

Peguillin set the pail down quickly and, bowing, left the room without a word.

Athenais, still in the tub, watched as Louis walked across the room toward her.

"Is this the way you entertain while I am otherwise engaged?" he asked.

"Peguilin came in while I was bathing, it's not my fault. I could hardly turn him away without upsetting the impression you hope to create."

Louis sighed and sat in the chair formerly occupied by Peguilin. He couldn't argue with her for she could turn his own words against him, an experience he found exasperating.

"Peguilin wanted to know how long our charade was going to go on," she told the King.

"Perhaps it would be best to drop it," he answered, undecided.

Athenais stood and stepped from the tub. The water streaming from her body made a small pool on the polished wood of the floor and she reached for a towel to dry her skin. She was aware that, in his silence, Louis was admiring her figure and that he would find no fault in it. She was plump without being unfashionably so, and her skin was a delicate pink. She finished drying herself and slipped into a fur-trimmed robe. Pulling the pins from her hair, she shook it about her shoulders, glad that Louis's timely entrance had saved it from the soaking it surely would have received at the hands of Lauzun. "We will have to go into the other room," she told Louis.

"No, we will have to stay here."

"We can't stay here," she protested, allowing him to take her in his arms. "The maids must empty the tub and wipe the water from the floor."

"They can do that later." Louis pulled her toward the large, curtained bed.

"I don't want a big water stain on the floor of my room," she persisted, refusing to let herself be moved.

"This suite is depressing enough without that."

"Your rooms depress you?"

"Well, they are just so small. If I had more room we wouldn't have to leave the room when we don't want to."

"Then you shall have larger rooms," the King promised.

"When?" Athenais pressed for a commitment.

"Tomorrow or the next day, I promise."

"Then I won't have to live with the stain if the water mars the floor?"

"No!"

She allowed herself to be led across the room. She knew that, to Louis, a promise, even one made in a moment of such urgency, must be honored. Soon she would have magnificent rooms and there would be no need to fool the Court with tales of affairs with Peguillin.

If the Court was at all fooled by the "affair" of Athenais and Peguillin, the Marquis de Montespan was not.

He arrived in the morning while Athenais lay in bed, half-awake and half-asleep, in that happily drowsy state when the limits of one's existence are the edges of a warm bed. Athenais became aware of his arrival when a new footman, unaware of the Marquis's identity, refused him entry to her rooms. The ensuing struggle, resulting in a severe beating for the unfortunate lackey at the hands of the Marquis, brought Athenais and a bevy of squealing maids to the apartment entrance.

"Stop this noise!" Athenais cried as she wrenched the door open, "I will not tolerate. . ." she stopped

suddenly as her husband delivered a final blow with his mud-caked boot to the satin-covered midsection of his victim. "Pardaillian. . .," she breathed, and the sound of her voice caught his attention long enough for the injured man to be carried away.

Pardaillian de Montespan straightened to his full height. "Good morning, Madame." He bowed coldly. "Am I to be admitted to your rooms or shall we carry on our conversations here in the corridor?"

Athenais stepped back into the apartment and, with a wave of her hand, dismissed the curious maidservants who retired to listen at the door.

The Marquis strolled around the room examining its furnishings. "You seem to be doing rather well for our income, Madame. Can it be that you've found a new way to stretch out money? Or have you had a run of luck at the gaming tables?"

"It's none of your business," Athenais snapped.

"On the contrary, it is my business," Pardaillian eyed her the way a predator eyes its prey. His cold blue eyes, so different from the admiring grey-blue ones of the King, glittered dangerously with a fanaticism tinged with madness. His blond, curled wig was wind-blown and his clothing bore traces of his just-completed journey over roads made boggy by the rain of the day before. "Who is it? Tell me who it is!"

Athenais turned swiftly for the door to the next room, intending to cross it and barricade herself in her bed-chamber, but the Marquis was faster.

He grabbed her arm and pulled her toward him. "Tell me!" he ordered and, in his eyes, Athenais could see the glint of the professional soldier to whom blood and death are nothing.

She shook her head and screamed as his broad, calloused hand struck her across the face. "Tell me!" he

repeated, hand raised to strike again. Again, she refused and struggled to free herself and, again, his hand slashed through the air to her face.

Athenais tasted the warm blood in her mouth and knew she was injured. "Peguilin. . .," she whispered, her face aching with the effort, "Peguilin de Lauzun."

"I don't believe you," Pardaillian spat, pushing her away from him.

She sprawled across the floor and, falling, struck her head against a silver table. She lay waiting for the welcome haze of unconsciousness which wouldn't come.

Pardaillian stood over her menacingly, "Tell me the truth!"

"The King. . .," she feared the kick of her husband's heavy boot which he would no more hesitate using on her than he had hesitated using it on her footman. "It is the King."

"I said the truth!" Obviously disbelieving her, Pardaillian knelt beside her and pulled her face close to his. "Is it the Prince de Condé? The Marshall de Turenne?"

"I told you, it is the King."

"If it were the King, La Vallière would not be occupying her old apartment!" Pardaillian roared. "If it were the King, you would not be here, so far from him!"

Athenais felt the dizzy spirals of a faint coming to her at last and, through the haze, heard her husband slam out of the apartment after having stolen a diamond bracelet she'd been careless enough to leave on the table. He would sell it, she had no doubt, and return drunk. She would have to get a message to Louis before that happened.

She awoke in bed late in the afternoon and asked for

a mirror. The sympathetic faces of her maids told her much and, grabbing the mirror from Madelon, she stared with horror at her disfigured visage.

Pardaillan's slaps had left a bruise along the left side of her face from brow to chin, her left eye was blood-shot, and the skin around it was swollen and blackened. The inside of her mouth felt raw and painful and she could feel a jagged cut with her tongue. On top of her head was a lump and from it radiated sharp points of pain making her every move an agony. Athenais began to cry but, finding it only increased the pain, stopped. She stationed Madelon outside the hidden panel to head off the King.

In her darkened bedchamber, the drapes drawn and candles placed at discreet distances, she lay perfectly still on the bed, avoiding any movement which might increase the pain and bring back the dizziness and sickness she experienced. Periodically, maids came and went with cold compresses and ointments for the bruises. She didn't intend to notify a doctor about her injuries. The sovereign remedies of the day were bleeding and purging and she didn't intend to do either. The doctors would be kept away if she had to do it herself.

She lay alone in the silent room, the maids having left and Madelon outside the panel. The quiet seemed complete and then, a click. The tapestry on the wall moved with the hidden panel. Madelon had sent Louis away and was returning. She didn't open her eyes.

"Athenais . . ." the sound of the King's voice came from nearby the bed.

"Oh no. . .!" She knew that Madelon had been unable to turn him away, or had deliberately disobeyed her orders. "Go away." She pulled the coverlet over her face. She felt herself raised and cradled in the King's arms. The coverlet was gently drawn away from her

injured skin. "No," she sobbed. "I don't want you to see." The King, more than anything else, abhorred illness. She was afraid he would turn from her.

"Athenais, he will not get away with this. . .this abomination!" He lowered her to the bed and left the room, slamming the panel behind him.

* * *

For six days Athenais did not leave her rooms, and, although the circumstances were not readily known, it was common knowledge that an offense had been committed against her. Shortly thereafter, her husband had been arrested in Paris and taken to the Bastille to be imprisoned for an indefinite length of time.

When finally she decided, with relief, that her injuries were healed, Athenais went for a solitary walk in the gardens. On her return to the palace, she encountered a group of petitioners leaving, having been informed that His Majesty would not be receiving any requests that morning. One of them, a tall, rather shabbily elegant woman seemed familiar. Athenais stared at her and then called out: "Françoise! Françoise Scarron!"

The woman stopped and quinted in the sun, shading her eyes with a rather worse-for-the-wear fan. "Athenais!" She left the group who turned to see the glamorous Court lady who hailed one of their number.

"What are you doing here?" Athenais asked as the woman reached her.

Françoise shrugged. The last time they'd met was while Paul Scarron, the crippled poet and husband of Françoise, was still living. He had since died and, with him, the small pension upon which they'd lived. "I come to present petitions to the King," she said resignedly. "I have given him hundreds."

"Hundreds!" Athenais drew her old friend away from the busy path and toward a secluded bench. "What is it you want?"

"My pension." Françoise indicated the threadbare gown she wore. "As you can see, I am not in the best financial position."

"I thought you and Scarron were doing fairly well."

"But most of his appointments and prerogatives were a result of his Court connections, they were not something you could inherit. And anyway, any money he had saved went to clear his debts after he died."

Athenais nodded, "So now you must petition the King."

The young widow leaned closer with an air of confidentiality, "This may be the last time."

"You mean he will reinstate the pension?"

"No," Françoise paused, "You have heard that Mademoiselle d'Aumale, the Princess de Nemours, is to marry the heir of the King of Portugal? She has offered me a position in her household."

"You are going to Portugal? Oh, Françoise!" Athenais shared the popular opinion that to leave France was the worst fate which could befall one. "You're not really thinking of going?"

"What else can I do?"

Athenais thought for a moment. "I'll tell you what, draw up another petition." She saw the exasperation in Françoise's eyes, "No, now listen, draw it up and sign it 'Françoise d'Aubigny,' your maiden name. I myself will give it to the King and I promise you shall have your money."

Françoise looked skeptical. "How can you be so sure? What if I lose my chance with the Princess de Nemours and then you are unable to do as you say?"

Athenais patted her hand. "I can do as I say. I guar-

antee it!"

Later, the petition in hand, Athenais waited for the King to arrive. When, at last, he made his appearance, she handed the paper to him.

"What? Now you are petitioning me?" he said, unfolding the paper. His eyes scanned the sheet swiftly, "Oh, no!" he groaned, reaching the bottom, "the widow Scarron yet again."

"You must grant her the pension, Louis. After all she deserves it, for her family if for no other reason. The Aubignys have been friends of your ancestors for years. Henri IV, your own grandfather. . ."

He held up a hand to silence her, "I am tired of hearing about her," he pouted, tossing his coat in a corner, his plumed hat after it, and his cane on top of all.

"Then give her the money and she'll leave you alone," Athenais insisted. She stepped behind the chair into which the King had sunk and, skewering his hair on top of his head with hairpins, she began kneading the tight muscles in his neck and shoulders.

He closed his eyes and relaxed under her strong, massaging fingers.

"Give her the money," Athenais whispered.

"Hmmmmmm," Louis was uninterested.

"Louis!" Her sharp fingers dug into his shoulders. "Give her the money!"

"I will!" he cried.

"Promise?" her voice became soft once more and her fingers gentle.

"Yes, I promise," he sighed.

Athenais smiled. Françoise, she knew, would be grateful, and grateful people were useful people.

Chapter VII

The Court was leaving Mass. The King had been seated in his royal box at the rear of the chapel, facing the altar, while his courtiers who, even in the presence and worship of God must not turn their backs upon their sovereign, had faced the King. It was a practice much commented upon throughout Europe.

Athenais left with the Queen's household. Although she went to Mass with sporadic regularity, she did not always go as part of the Queen's suite. The Queen, who was too slow to appreciate Athenais's wit and therefore felt even more left out than usual in her company, did not insist on her presence. Today, however, Athenais had gone and was, along with the rest of the Court, treated to the sight and sound of Marie-Thérèse snuffling and dabbing at her fat red nose. She was distressed, it seemed, because the King, who habitually spent at least part of every night in her bed, had failed to put in an appearance the night before.

"Not at all!" she had been wailing when Athenais arrived at her apartment that morning. "Not even to wish me a good night!" Her anguish was genuine, she was so upset she hadn't been able to drink all of her chocolate.

Athenais, superior in the knowledge of where the King had spent the night, found her a ridiculous figure.

All through the Mass, the Queen sobbed and, as the reason for her tears spread through the chapel, titters and snickers could be heard. The King, who liked silence to accompany the services, scowled at the Queen upsetting her more, causing more tears and fresh sobs, which, in their turn, caused more titters from the courtiers.

The Queen, who alone still regarded La Vallière as the bane of her existence, cast withering glances at the uncomfortable Louise while the rest of the Court knowingly glanced at Athenais. For her part, Athenais studiously followed the service, possibly the only one in the chapel that morning to do so.

And now they were leaving Mass, Athenais, following the Queen, saw the King's household moving toward them. She attempted to place herself at the far side of the retinue so that when the groups merged she shouldn't be too near Their Majesties.

The households blended together and, to their great surprise, the Queen returned the King's gracious greeting with an awkward stamp of her foot. "Not at all! You didn't come at all!" she cried to his face.

Louis froze. His sense of dignity outraged, it seemed the throbbing veins in his temples must burst. When he spoke, his voice was tight and cold: "Madame, have we not always shared the same bed?"

The Queen nodded, "Certainly, Sire."

"And have there been many occasions upon which I have been unable to join you at night?"

Marie-Thérèse shook her head, "No, Sire."

"And have I not always behaved with graciousness and respect toward you?"

"Yes, Sire."

Louis paused, the Court held its breath. "Then what more do you want!" he snapped and started off toward the gardens.

Many of the Queen's household, including La Vallière and Athenais, left her and followed the King. The Queen, with the few attendants who remained with her, hurried back to her apartment and spent the day indisposed. She would not, she sent word, accompany the Court on its promenade through the gardens.

Behind Louis, with Louise on one arm and Athenais on the other, the Court was buzzing with the humiliation of the Queen. It would not soon be forgotten.

Louis left the shade of the palace and, the rest of the Court close behind, crossed the South Terrace, the Terrace of Flowers. It was a lovely place, filled with many kinds of flowers and surrounded with cypress trees and shrubs. Beyond that ran a golden balustrade lined with stone vases painted to look as though they were made of the finest porcelain. Also a part of the Terrace of Flowers was the statuary which depicted Cloris, the goddess of the flowers, Zephyrus, her husband, Hyacinthus, and others.

The King, who liked his courtiers to be well acquainted with the gods and goddesses of mythology, pointed these figures out to them as they strolled through the garden.

Beyond the Terrace of Flowers was the ramp leading to the Orangery. The King loved the scent of orange blossoms and the orangery had been one of the first features of the gardens. Thousands of orange trees, each in a silver tub, grew in this perfectly ordered garden. They were grown symmetrically and tended by the multitudes of gardeners who took their orders from Le Nôtre, the King's head gardener.

The Court murmured its dutiful admiration and the King accepted it as a gracious host.

Reaching the far end of the orangery, the company found a number of carriages awaiting them. As the King, accompanied by Louise and Athenais, boarded

the first and most splendid of the vehicles, so the Court jostled one another for places in the other conveyances. The horses started off, taking them to the King's menagerie.

The menagerie was a hexagonal compound segmented with railings and walls around a lovely eight-sided building which had balconies from which one could view the animals. Among the animals in the King's collection were camels, jungle cats, elephants, and a multitude of various birds—ostriches, parrots, cockatoos, flamingoes, and herons.

The courtiers toured the elegant building, admiring the giant elephants and sleek cats, laughing at the lumbering camels. They called to the birds and commented on their beautiful plumage. In a short while, however, they began to grow restless and complain of hunger and thirst.

"What we need is some refreshment," Louis decided, taking a cue from the murmurings of his courtiers. "I believe I could arrange something."

The gentlemen and ladies gathered eagerly around hoping for a taste of the King's prize wine or delicate pastries.

"There is a cavern beneath this building," the King announced. "I believe that there we shall all find a refreshing experience awaiting us."

With little respect for the royal presence, the splendidly attired courtiers rushed for the staircase leading into the grotto beneath the menagerie. Athenais waited for Louis with Louise. He seemed slow to move. "There will be nothing left when we arrive," she told him, aware of the gluttonous appetites of the Court when it came to free food.

"Follow me," Louis told her, a secret smile playing around his lips. He sauntered after the last of the nobles

who were crowding down to the grotto and slipped behind a decorative screen near the head of the stairs. To Athenais's amazement, the wall behind the screen held a multitude of taps which the King began manipulating with gleeful enthusiasm. Below, in the grotto, screams could be heard echoing up the stairs and, shortly, the courtiers who had so eagerly descended the steps began emerging. Peeking around the screen, Athenais began to laugh heartily while Louise clucked with characteristic sympathy.

Gentlemen ascended the stairs in dripping satin, splashed and ruined, holding soggy wigs in their hands like drowned animals. Shoes squished and bubbled as they walked. The ladies, their hair so recently curled and arranged, now lay flat or hanging in tangled masses, stepped out of the staircase holding soaked and clinging satin and taffeta away from wet legs. They were a sorry sight and, as they left the menagerie for the trip back to the palace, many a baleful glance was directed at the King and his two ladies who alone of the entire company did not appear to have spent the past hour in a rain-storm.

"There are pipes," Louis was explaining to Athenais, "in the walls and floors. And, through them, by turning the appropriate taps, one can direct a stream of icy water across the grotto."

"Oh, it's wonderful!" Athenais exclaimed, happy to have been spared the embarrassment of re-entering the palace attired in dripping clothing.

"They must feel terrible. I think it's cruel," Louise complained from across the carriage.

Louis and Athenais, seated together on one side of the vehicle, spared her one disgusted glance and then ignored her for the rest of the ride.



Athenais mounted the wide marble staircases and walked toward her rooms. Along the way she was met by an ever-increasing number of smiles, greetings, and compliments. Versailles's population, with the possible exception of a few like the Queen, was becoming daily surer of the identity of its ruler's newest love. She returned the smiles generously, her mood rising with every new act of deference she met.

She swept grandly into her rooms, ready to impress Madelon with accounts of her triumphs, only to stop suddenly, barely across the threshold. The room was empty, bare to the walls which were themselves bare. She rushed through the other two rooms and even into the tiny bath chamber—all empty. Everything she owned was gone! "Madelon!" she screamed, knowing that even she was missing but not knowing who else she should call.

"Madame?" a quiet voice came from behind her.

She whirled toward the door. A tall, blond, handsome young man stood there. Dressed in the King's livery, Athenais knew that he must be here to inform her of the whereabouts of her belongings. "Yes?"

"I have been sent by the High Chamberlain to take you to your new apartment."

Athenais heard the murmurs start in the group of courtiers who had been drawn by her exclamation of a few moments before. She could have thrown back her head and laughed. Her new apartment!

She followed the young man back down the stairs she'd ascended earlier and she, in turn, was followed by a group of curious nobles. They passed through the royal apartments and stopped before a pair of tall, gilded doors.

"This is it?" she asked and was assured that it was. With a flourish she opened the doors and stepped into a

large reception room. Madelon stood in the room barely concealing her excitement.

The room was hung in pink, a delicate apple-blossom pink against which the silver of the furniture and the silver lace of the window drapes glittered beautifully. The floor was gleaming parquet, intricately designed and scattered over with rugs into which was woven the pink of the walls and the silver of the furnishings.

With a cry, Athenais rushed through the other two rooms which, although equal in number to those in her former quarters, were much larger and more airy. The windows looked out onto the Marble Court, the heart of Versailles.

The room next to the pink reception salon was hung in white and furnished with colorful carpets and cabinets of inlaid ebony painted with exquisite scenes of the gods and goddesses of love.

At last she entered the bedchamber and, oblivious to those courtiers who had followed her, she stood in the open doors and gazed at the gorgeous room. It was blue, the blue of the sky in midsummer, and the silk covering the walls was shot with threads of gold. The furniture—tables, chairs, chests, and even the bed were heavily leafed with gold worked into beautiful designs. The upholstery of the chairs and sofas repeated the pattern of the walls and the huge fourposter bed seemed swathed in gold lace. Across the room from the bed, a cavernous fireplace yawned promising warm winter nights. To either side of the fireplace, tall mirrored panels filled the remaining space of the wall.

Madelon, who followed Athenais through the rooms, motioned her to another door. Inside Athenais found a bath chamber tiled in a mosaic pattern of shades of yellow. It was the one room without a window but the bright colors helped to alleviate any darkness. A large

marble bathtub was sunk into the floor and, in its center was a drain which would be welcome to her servants. Past the tub, behind a delicate screen, were any other facilities she might require and there she also found her portable tub. There would be baths in the bed chamber after all!

She returned to the pink and silver room where she'd entered the apartment and accepted the awestruck congratulations of the courtiers who had accompanied her. Acknowledging their compliments, Athenais shooed them out and returned to her explorations.

Before nightfall there wasn't an ear in the Court that had not heard of the triumph of Madame de Montespan. As sure as the weather vanes on top of the stables, when next the Queen and Athenais happened to meet, Marie-Thérèse turned a haughty nose at her former confidante.

But even though the Court knew of Athenais's relationship with the King, none could point with certainty to specific events which could prove that she was his mistress. And Louis, to her chagrin, refused to acknowledge it publicly as yet. He came to her rooms publicly, there being as yet no secret passage connecting their apartments, but he brought Louise. With none to witness save Madelon, there were none to say that the King and Athenais were alone. Many saw the King and La Vallière enter Athenais's apartment and many saw them leave. What no one saw was Louise, Duchesse de Vaujours playing cards with Athenais's waiting women while she and the King retired to the blue and gold bed-chamber.

"Why does Louise have to be here?" she asked for the hundredth time.

"I think you know the reason," Louis answered, toying with an apple picked from one of his own trees.

"But everyone knows we are lovers."

The King sighed. He hated to displease her. "I don't feel that the time is right for you to be declared publicly."

"But she comes in with that sour face," Athenais grimaced, imitating Louise. "She makes me depressed."

"It will only be for a short time," Louis promised. "The workmen are building the passage."

Athenais sulked for a moment, but it wasn't in her nature to brood for long. "I just wish Louise didn't have to be here," she sighed.

Louis put the apple back in the gold bowl which held other apples as well as an assortment of other fruit. He ate voraciously at mealtimes and never in between. "Perhaps I can work something out."

* * *

Athenais lay back against the warm pillows of her bed. She smiled, knowing that the gossip mongers of the palace would be whispering again before nightfall. Many had seen the tall red-haired footman leave her chambers after having spent a long time with her alone. Louis had taken to disguises. He came to her as a tradesman, dressed soberly in a felt hat and unadorned cloth coat; he came as an artisan, ostensibly to work on some art treasure for her. He wore an array of wigs and false mustaches and beards. Once, in an episode she loved, he appropriated the livery of one of his nobles and happened to meet that man in the corridors. The noble, seeing what he thought was one of his footmen dallying where he was not supposed to be, had given Louis a good swat with his cane. But the King enjoyed subterfuge, he adored wending his way through the corridors

of his palace unrecognized by his own courtiers. He enjoyed being a common person now and again and it served them well.

As a young man, he had been known to climb out onto the roofs of the Louvre and go exploring, testing the windows of the chambers belonging to his mother's maids of honor. When even younger he had often played at being a valet with Marie Mancini, his first love.

And now that he was grown, his own man out from under the thumb of his mother and her cardinals, he still liked pretending, only now to a more adult purpose.

* * *

Athenais took a long last look at herself in the tall mirrors of her bedchamber. She was about to leave for the fête in the gardens and anxiously gave her ensemble a critical glance.

Her gown was of blue satin, the same blue as the room in which she stood. The fitted bodice, its neckline making a horizontal sweep across her breasts and around her arms where it fell just below her shoulders, ended in a deep point in front below her waist. The skirt of the same material was caught up in front and drawn back on both sides to fasten at the back. The underskirt was of silver cloth, literally covered with crystals that glittered in the candlelight with her every move. Around the top of the bodice a matching flounce of silver lace sparkled, as it did at the ends of the elbow-length satin sleeves through whose open seams more of the silver cloth showed. Her hair, partly drawn back in a chignon, the rest falling into loose ringlets, was unadorned save for the band of silver ribbon sewn with crystals encircling the chignon at the back of her head. Satisfied

thast she looked her best, Athenais left the room.

The fête began with a promenade in the gardens, through the flower laden terraces and past the ponds to the Grotto of Thetis—a temple dedicated to the ancient gods of the sea. Under its three arches Apollo was portrayed as well as tritons, dolphins, and other creatures associated with the sea. The promenade continued, the ladies in barouches, the gentlemen on foot. Along their way, to their delight, there were tables covered with delicacies of every description—fruit, marzipan, and molded sugar. Above their heads, the trees were hung with fruit of every description, plums, oranges, pears, peaches; a hungry noble had merely to reach up and pick the object of their choice.

In the outdoor theater a play, *Georges Dandin* by Moliere, was performed and the music of Jean-Baptiste Lully, the King's favorite composer, filled the air.

A building was especially constructed for the fête, its interior ablaze with candles which were reflected in fountains ranged around the walls. It was the setting for supper. The courtiers sat at silver tables, Athenais at the table of the Duchesse de Montausier. Louise sat next to the King. It should have pleased La Vallière more than it did, but she was sullen and several times she brushed a tear from her pale cheek. It should have annoyed Athenais more than it did, but the merry laughter which emanated from those seated around her attracted the attention of many, not the least of whom was the King himself.

If Athenais was merry it was because she knew that she had won, that Louise must soon acknowledge her. She would, in the tradition of great royal mistresses in France's history, soon rule with Louis as the uncrowned queen of the realm.

The company moved to yet another building which

had been built for the fête. It was of porphyry and marble. Around its walls, tier upon tier, were gilded boxes in which those who didn't care to dance could sit, converse, and watch the graceful movements of the dancers. In the course of a dance, Athenais and Louis came together.

"You are enjoying yourself!" Louis said, almost reproachfully.

"Indeed I am!" Athenais agreed. "How can one fail to enjoy oneself when the night is beautiful, the company is agreeable, and one is going to bear the child of someone she loves."

The dance forced them to move apart, to go on to other partners but over her shoulder Athenais saw Louis staring at her, oblivious to the smile of the lady who was now his partner.

Dawn's first rays of light were beginning to streak the sky over Versailles when the Court walked sleepily down to Petit Parc and gasped in awe as the sky, the palace, and the statuary were illuminated by skyrockets bursting with deafening crashes. The magnificent display glittered and fell and flashed again until finally, as a shining finale, the King's cipher was traced in golden stars above their heads.

The Court turned toward the palace, all hoping for a few short hours of rest before they must attend to business. The King, leading them out of the gardens, offered his hand to Athenais. Behind them, the Court, never too tired for gossip and speculation, buzzed excitedly. Louise de La Vallière and Marie-Thérèse exchanged a sadly familiar and mutually commiserating glance.

Chapter VIII

Athenais's child was born early on a March morning when the last, stubborn vestiges of winter hung jealously around the walls of Saint-Germain.

A midwife was brought and the King's own doctor appeared at intervals. The fire in the fireplace was fed continually and stoked to blazing and the temperature in the room was much higher than any other place in the drafty, ill-heated palace.

"How do you feel?" Madelon asked nervously as Athenais stitched on a small piece of embroidery.

"I am having a baby, how do you think I feel?" Athenais replied irritably. Madelon was pacing the floor and clucking like a hen; it was getting on her nerves. "Please, sit down or do something!" she snapped at last. "I have had a child before, you know!"

The waiting woman looked at her with hurt eyes. "I worry about you," she reproached Athenais.

"I'm sorry. But do sit down." Athenais extended the needlework to her, "Here, stitch on your embroidery, I'm making a mess of it anyway." She leaned back on the rolled bolster of her sofa and rested as the midwife told her to, staring out the window at the bleak snow-frosted countryside.

"Madame, I must examine you," the midwife interrupted her musings.

"All right." Athenais hoisted herself from the low sofa and crossed the room to where the table upon which she would lay had been placed near the fire.

The midwife removed the meager rings from her plump fingers and washed her hands in a china bowl of warm water brought for the purpose. "All is well," she announced over the groan emitted by her patient. "The pains are becoming rapidly more frequent."

"I heard," the midwife's young daughter and assistant ventured, "that pain in childbirth is eased if a woman puts her husband's hat on her belly during the delivery."

In spite of her pains Athenais laughed heartily, "A reminder like that would be the greatest pain yet!" she told the girl and the midwife threw her daughter a sour look.

The doors of the bedchamber were flung open and Louis arrived having been informed of the imminent birth of his child. "Will it be soon?" he demanded of the midwife.

"Yes, Sire. Madame has had a very easy time of her labor."

"Don't believe it!" Athenais contradicted good-naturedly. But she was glad for the reassuring pressure of Louis's strong hands as he held one of hers. "I don't want any sheep brought in here," she insisted to the King as he wiped a veil of perspiration from her brow. The practice of wrapping a newly delivered woman in the skin of a freshly killed sheep was utilized by many midwives.

"No, no sheep," he promised.

She drifted away on the warm waves of the last moments of her labor. Dimly she heard the mid-wife announce that the child, a boy, had been born. She opened her eyes and saw Louis cradling a tiny bundle in

his arms. He waited until the servants had carried her to the bed and then sat down beside her. Lowering the baby into her arms, he smiled as she examined the red, wriggling infant. His eyes were a pale color, different from her own dark ones and would, she had no doubt, be the same grey-blue as those of his royal father. His hair, abundant for a newly born child, was dark, hardly surprising in that both she and Louis had dark hair.

"He looks like the skinned sheep," Athenais commented. She did not find new babies particularly attractive.

"That will pass quickly," Louis told her with an air of authority. This child, her second, was for him, counting those of the Queen, La Vallière, and now Athenais, his ninth.

Athenais smiled sleepily and struggled to keep her eyes open. The King, seeing her fatigue, kissed her tenderly. Consigning the child to the nurse, and Athenais to the care of the midwife, he left the room.

When she awoke the room was empty save for the ever-present Madelon. Candles had been lit against the dark of the night and the fire had been allowed to burn down to a normal level. "Madelon?" She sat up in bed and stretched her sleep cramped limbs.

"How are you feeling?" Madelon asked from across the quiet room.

"I'm fine. Has the news gone out?" She felt that the birth of their child would establish her precedence over all other ladies be they Marquise, Princess, or Queen.

"The King wants to speak to you," Madelon replied cryptically. She left the chamber to send a message to His Majesty.

Athenais stared after her, puzzled for a moment and then, shrugging, lifted the covers to survey the damage of pregnancy to her body. It was not secret that Louis

had turned to La Vallière during the Queen's pregnancies, and Louise's loss of favor was due in large part to ill-health brought on by too frequent child-bearing. She wanted to regain her figure and robust appearance as soon as possible.

Her thoughts were distracted by the arrival of the King who had apparently come as soon as he was apprised of her awaking.

"Hello, darling," she smiled, wishing she had asked Madelon for a comb and mirror before sending for Louis.

"Good evening," he returned, sitting next to her on the blue satin coverlet.

"There's some problem with the baby?" she asked, not knowing what to expect. The child had seemed extremely healthy, not in the least like the puling, sickly offspring brought forth by the Queen occasionally.

"Not with the baby himself, he is beautiful, exactly the child I would expect from you," Louis assured her. "It is your husband I am worried about."

Athenais sat up suddenly. "Is he. . .he is not. . .here?"

"No! No! Not here." Louis calmed her and pressed her back against the comfortable softness of the pillows. "But he could come here whenever he wished. He was released from prison and sent to his estates but for no particular length of time. Legally, he could present himself at any time and claim the child as his own."

"He wouldn't dare!" Athenais's eyes flashed. "I would kill him!"

"Still, you are his wife."

"We have not been husband and wife, in that sense, for years," she reminded him.

"But you are his wife, and any child of your body is legally his child, to do with as he sees fit."

Athenais digested this thoughtfully, "And it would be just like him to take our child away."

The King nodded. "We must keep the details and whereabouts of the child a secret until we can deal with Monsieur e Montespan.

"Then he cannot stay at Court," Athenais said. "I wish he could." Louis nodded approvingly but she was motivated less by maternal love than by a picture in her mind of herself, queening it in the palace corridors, followed by her women and a barrage of nurses attending to the King's child. Also, since he could not be acknowledged publicly, no titles could be conferred upon him. "Well," she decides, "we must find someone to care for him in the meantime."

"I will buy a house in Parish where he can have a household of his own," Louis offered.

Athenais smiled gratefully. "But the person in charge must be above reproach, beyond bribery and deceit, with a reason to be loyal to us." Her mind skimmed the possibilities, she snapper her fingiers. "Françoise, Françoise Scarron!"

Louis groaned. "The widow Scarron again! You said that if I granted her pension, I would not have to hear of that woman again."

"Louis, that woman is exactly the person we need! She is scrupulously honest, disgustingly discreet, and what's more, she owes me her pension and you her loyalty."

"But she is so pious, such a prude," the King protested.

"Not at all—for all her piety she understands all types of people. Her best friend is Ninon de L'Enclos."

"Ninon!" Mademoiselle de L'Enclos was a famous courtesan, famous even in the time of Louis's father. She was a prostitute by choice and many of the Court

gallants and ladies frequented her witty salon.

"You see? She is the very person. She lives in a convent as a boarder and yet she is not above extending her friendship to a confirmed courtesan. I tell you, Françoise is just the person for little Louis." She and the King had named their child Louis-Auguste de Bourbon. The King had promised that he should be the Duc du Maine.

After a while, Louis was persuaded and Athenais sent a coach to fetch the widow Scarron from the convent.

"Oh, Athenais! He is beautiful." The handsome widow bent over the ornate white carved cradle. Little Louis-Auguste was indeed a lovely infant. As the King had predicted, the redness and strained look of the newborn child had given way to a delicate, pink-tinged complexion, soft as the finest satin and unblemished. His eyes were already beginning to show traces of the grey-blue of his father's and the plastered-down wisps of hair had fluffed into soft brown curls with shimmering golden highlights.

"He is lovely!" Françoise repeated, "but whose is he? I know Pardaillan has been away from Court for a long while," her voice held a mild reproach.

"He is not Pardaillan's child," Athenais admitted. "That is why we. . .I. . .need someone I can trust to oversee a household for him, away from the prying eyes and gossiping tongues of the Court."

"A household! The child's father must be very rich."

"Yes," Athenais confirmed. "He is rich."

"And married."

"Yes, and married. Do not try to bring your convent into my rooms, Françoise. The. . .the child's father and I love each other."

Françoise shook her head. "No, I don't think I could be a party to such an arrangement."

"Françoise, please!"

"No, Athenais, I don't think so."

"Oh, Françoise," she hesitated. "You won't agree to serve the King?"

"What has the King to do. . ." Françoise's eyes widened, "It is true! What Ninon said is true! She said that the King had a new mistress; you are that mistress."

"Yes! Oh, Françoise, yes! I am his mistress and this," she held up the infant, "this is his child. Please Françoise, I can't trust anyone else."

"I don't know," the widow seemed flustered. "I will have to let you know."



Françoise was back not long afterward. She had visited her confessor and been told that, on the condition that the King himself asked her to care for the child, she could not refuse.

Louise, after a little cajoling, agreed to ask the Scarron widow for the favor and an agreement was reached.

A lovely house was found and purchased, located between Paris and Vaugirard. It was furnished to Françoise's specifications under direction from Athenais who turned the bills over the Louis, who turned them over to Colbert, the Minister of Finance, who grumbled a great deal. Servants were engaged after lengthy interviews and investigations and, finally, Françoise moved from her convent into the beautiful home. It was time for the child to be brought.

Françoise, on the night appointed, was to drive out to Saint-Germain in the coach which was part of her equipage. In her rooms, Athenais was to don a par-

ticularly voluminous cloak and, with a willing Peguillin de Lauzun, stroll through the galleries and slip from the palace to the waiting coach. Under the cloak she was to carry the infant who, she hoped, would be sleeping.

Standing in the cold air of the night, watching the coach rumble away toward the secret house, Athenais breathed a sigh of relief. One problem was out of the way. The rumors could fly thick and fast but there was no way that any proof could be brought to light.

Buy rumors, it seemed, were enough for some. The Marquis de Montespan came charing into the capital from his estates as soon as the rumors reached him. He had known, since his imprisonment for beating Athenais, that Louis was his wife's lover. He could have relaxed and allowed the traditional benefits of the husband of the *maîtresse en titre* to flow to him, the titles, the money, the privileges allotted complaisant husbands, but it was not his way.

He arrived at Saint-Germain when the Court was returning from the hunt. The King was in high spirits, Athenais was back on a horse for the first time since the birth of their child, the weather was bright and invigorating, and the quarry magnificent. The two of them rode ahead of the rest, side by side; it was Athenais who saw her husband's coach rolling up the road toward them. Something about it was odd. She strained her eyes toward it and then blanched. Atop the coach, wobbling, were a pair of enormous horns, fastened upright, to symbolize the horns of a cuckold.

"Oh, my God!" she moaned, drawing the King's attention to the embarrassing spectacle.

Louis glanced at once, then again, and swiftly turned

his horse, diverting the Court from the road and temporarily escaping the rantings of the mad Marquis.

But Athenais could not escape. Pardaillan came to her rooms as she was finishing her toilette, having changed from her soiled riding habit.

"Where is your bastard, Madame?" he demanded, the door scarcely having closed behind him.

Athenais had been steeling herself for this attack and her carefully controlled features changed not in the least. "I don't know what you're talking about," she replied, never taking her eyes from the mirror.

"You gave birth to the King's child, I know it!" he shouted, her calm serving only to inflame his anger. "Do you think I am totally ignorant of what goes on here?"

Athenais's gaze swept the room, "Do you see any of the equipment that accompanies the care of a baby? Do you hear a baby's cries? Look wherever you wish, Monsieur, tear the palace apart stone by stone, you will be hard put to find any baby of mine here."

Pardaillan's eyes studied her carefully for some sign which would reveal the truth or falsehood of her words, but Athenais was too sure of herself, too secure in her preparations to fear any betrayal. She stood her ground.

"But you are the King's mistress!" The Marquis's words had a pathetic ring to them.

"Yes, I am."

Pardaillan's angry expression gave way to one of infinite sadness. "Come away with me, leave this. I will forgive you anything, I will buy you anything you want, even if I have to sell everything I own for it."

"What can you give me, even if you sell everything?" Athenais asked, "Can you give me palaces? Can you give me diamonds the size of hen's eggs? Can you let me rule a country, queen in all but name?"

"Then I will have no more to do with you!" he raged.

"Fine," Athenais agreed. "It's what I've wanted all along."

"To me you are dead!" He clamped his bedraggled plumed hat upon his blonde wig, itself badly askew.

"Goodbye, Pardaillian," she said simply.

The Marquis stomped from the room, slamming the door with wall rattling force. It was the next day before Athenais learned of his last act of jealousy.

Pardaillian had arranged a funeral for her. He announced to all who would listen that his "late wife" had died from "coquetry." Draping himself, his coach, and his entire household in deepest mourning, he followed the funeral cortege of his "beloved Athenais" to her last resting place.

Louis was furious, Athenais amused, and the Court fed upon the scandal like candied fruit. At last Louis found a way to rid himself of the Marquis by making use of an incident unrelated to his affair with Athenais.

"The Marquis," Louis said, since he couldn't bring himself to refer to Pardaillian in any other fashion, "has been taken to Pignerol."

"Pignerol!" Athenais exclaimed. Far more fearsome than the Bastille, Pignerol was home to many of the King's most bitter enemies. "On what charge?"

"It seems that he abducted a peasant girl," Louis skimmed the reports, "and then, after dressing her as a boy, forced her to enlist in his regiment. Her family arranged to have her rescued. At that point the Marquis used his troops to storm the house where she was hiding and flogged her rescuer," he paused. "No mention of what happened to the girl."

"How long can you keep him in prison?" Athenais questioned.

"Not long enough. A pity he didn't kill the flogged

man. Murder is a much more serious offense. At any rate, he'll be banished to Gascony upon his release," the King bent and kissed one of Athenais's soft white shoulders. "I don't think we need worry about him any longer."

She smiled up at him from the bench of her dressing table, the feeling of power welling in her as heady as a draught of strong wine.

Athenais passed along the galleries followed by her suite. The number of attendants seemed to grow every day. Ladies were chosen for innate grace, casual elegance, and an ability to be charming and glamorous without ever approaching their mistress in comparison.

It was a cold, bitter day; the winter refused to give any hint of approaching spring. The Court remained at Saint-Germain to escape the ongoing construction of Versailles. Courtiers dressed warmly to brave the icy temperatures in the corridors even in the great chambers whose immense fireplaces, though heaped with blazing logs, never seemed warm enough. Athenais herself, a fur-lined velvet cloak tossed carelessly around her shoulders, seemed untouched by the cold. It was one of her many talents. Other nobles, their teeth chattering, asked her about her ability to brave the chill air with no more than a minimum of protection. To them she gave a smile and an elegant shrug of her magnificent white shoulders. Why tell them it came from long years of living in the great and often unheated rooms of the chateau of her father? Why admit that it was not a talent but a necessity? Why tarnish even a shred of the legend she was rapidly building around herself?

As she moved from room to room she acknowledged

the polite smiles, the sugared compliment, knowing full well that once she was out of earshot the sugar turned to vinegar, the compliment to a sneer. It didn't matter. She drifted in a warm cocoon formed of the King's love. Nothing could touch her, no harm befall her, for she was no ordinary woman. No detractor dared slander her too loudly even though there would be no jealous husband to protect her honor with his sword. Instead there was an all-powerful master whose frown brought ruin, whose word could condemn a man to the country or even to prison.

"Athenais! Athenais!" a masculine voice startled her from her reveries.

Turning she saw the proprietor of the voice, Peguilin de Lauzun. She should have known, only the irrepressible Duc would dare hail the King's mistress like a porter in the streets of Paris. "Peguilin." She offered him her hand as he reached her.

"I must speak to you." The Duc's face showed his anxiety tinged with the excitement which those who knew him well recognized as a sign of yet another scheme hatching in his fertile brain.

Athenais pouted. "You didn't even notice my new dress."

Peguilin laughed, knowing this to be a trick to keep him in suspense a bit longer. "It's nearly as lovely as what's inside it, eh?" He winked comically.

She giggled, it was nice to find a man who wasn't afraid to flatter her for fear of incurring the King's wrath. "What do you want to talk to me about?" she asked.

"We must talk alone." He wiggled his eyebrows, intimating that his news was of the utmost importance, and secrecy was imperative.

"All right." Athenais knew that once Peguilin

decided on a course of action no one in his plan would be given any peace until he had done his part. "Madelon," she turned to her suite, signaling the trusted woman to accompany them. It was not polite, no matter how old a friend one might be, for any man to be observed disappearing into a chamber with the favorite. The rest of the entourage was dismissed and the two women followed Peguillin to a secluded alcove apart from the courtier-filled rooms.

Athenais noticed, with a touch of annoyance, that one of the Duc's servants had been guarding the entrance against its being requisitioned by some urgent couple for one of the never-ceasing trysts indulged in by the Court. Not that the trysts annoyed her, but the obvious confidence of Peguillin that she would be willing to accompany him here smacked of complacency on his part and predictability on hers.

Once inside, a servant stationed outside the door to keep away the curious, the Duc motioned them to a couch near a window overlooking the park.

"Now, Peguillin, what is going on?" Athenais was growing impatient.

"The King," he began in an excited whisper, "is going to make me Grand Master of the Artillery." He finished with a flourish and leaned back in his chair.

"That's very nice," Athenais agreed, unenthusiastically.

"You already knew." It was the Duc's turn to pout.

"Yes, I knew. Louis told me had had promised you the post."

"He told you this, he told you that." Peguillin shook his head in mocking wonderment. "I don't know how you two ever managed to have a child, all you do is talk!"

Athenais giggled. "Not quite all, Peguillian, not quite

all.”

“At any rate, I want you to do everything you can to advance my case.”

“You know Louis doesn’t like me to meddle in his affairs of state.”

“Ah,” the little Duc wagged his finger knowingly under her nose, “but what he may want and what you do are not always the same.”

She smiled cryptically, admitting nothing. “I will mention it, if the conversation goes in that direction,” she promised.

Seizing her hand, the Duc covered it with kisses, interspersed with outrageous compliments setting both Athenais and Madelon, who had been silent until now, into gales of laughter.

At that moment, the footman stationed outside the door stuck his head in. “The King comes this way!”

Peguilin looked at Athenais. He did not want to spoil his chances by being suspected of a dalliance with the favorite.

“Compose yourself,” she told him. “We have done nothing. If we rush out there like naughty school-children, we will be suspected of something which never happened.”

Madelon produced a mirror which Athenais used to check her hair and makeup. Carefully arranging her skirts and cloak, they waited for the King’s inevitable arrival.

Peguilin lapsed into a tense silence which was soon interrupted as Athenais launched into a series of cruelly accurate imitations of dowagers of the Court paying their pathetically flirtatious compliments to the King.

When at last the royal head popped through the doorway, there were convulsed with gasping laughter.

“Something is funny,” the King murmured.

The three of them leaped to their feet as though previously unaware of his approach. Dropping as grand a curtsy as the tiny room would allow, Athenais reached a hand toward her lover.

"Come in, darling," she invited. "I was just being naughty as usual."

The King entered the alcove. His dutifully following courtiers were chagrined to see that there was no room for them and they could do nothing but wait for the King to emerge.

"Sit down." Athenais patted the couch beside her, she being the only one of the three to sit before the King.

"I don't know," the King said uncertainly. "Colbert is waiting."

"Can't he wait a moment?" She smiled up at him in that way curiously her own.

"Yes," Louis admitted as he joined her. "Sit, sit," he motioned to Peguillin and Madelon.

Athenais gazed out over the park which the King was planning to have entirely replanted. Le Nôtre and his army of gardeners were going to position ancient lime trees selected to line the great terrace. "It's coming along nicely," she commented with the proprietary air which surprised and annoyed many courtiers.

"Yes," the King agreed. "You were right about the garden."

Peguillin covered a grin with a counterfeit sneeze, applying his handkerchief to his face. The way in which Athenais had assumed charge of the King never failed to amuse him. Versailles she left to the King's discretion. She was of the opinion that it was wasted work and money and would probably sink into the marsh before it was finished. But Saint-Germain she had taken to her heart. She directed the redecorating which was beginning to look as though she intended to have the

palace completely rebuilt.

At last the King rose to leave. Athenais, Madelon, and Peguilin got to their feet. Offering her his arm, Louis and Athenais swept out of the alcove past the bowing courtiers.

It was few days later when Athenais was again accosted by an incensed Duc de Lauzun in the gallery.

"I am going to be forced to stop coming this way!" she smiled.

"Come with me!" Peguilin was in no mood for chatter.

"Peguilin, do you mind!" She disengaged the arm by which he was dragging her along. Reaching the same curtained alcove they'd occupied before, Lauzun poured out his sad tale. "Has the King told you?" he didn't wait for an answer. "I am not to be Grand Master of the Artillery." He sank dejectedly into the chair.

"No, he didn't tell me." Athenais was bored with the subject. "Why are you not getting the appointment?"

"I don't know!" The Duc jumped up to pace the tiny floor. "He won't tell me. He says I know!"

"And you don't know?"

"Of course, I don't know! That's what I want you to find out."

"Ah, Peguilin." She made a bored gesture with one hand. "How am I to find out?"

"Ask him! He tells you everything!"

She was anxious to end this disagreeable scene. "Very well. I'll ask him," she promised, resolving to do nothing.

The days passed, however, and nothing was learned. Everytime they met, Peguillin would raise his eyebrows in question and she would shrug intimating that the subject had not arisen. Behind her, Madelon would blush. The Duch had begun paying court to Athenais's waiting woman.

At last, Peguillin forced Athenais to promise that, should the King not bring up the subject, she would call his attention to it.

That afternoon, shortly before the King was to arrive, Madelon rushed into her mistress's bedchamber. "Madame! The Duc de Lauzun says he must speak to you!"

"It will have to wait!" Athenais watched in her mirror as the hairdresser positioned the last heavy curl.

"But Madame, it's urgent!"

Athenais turned toward the woman, motioning the hairdresser out of the room. "Madelon, I know of you and Lauzun. I don't care what you do nor with whom but don't expect me to be at your lover's beck and call."

"The King will not be here for a half hour," Madelon sulked. It was true, Louis's maddening punctuality was such that one could set the clocks by his daily routine.

"Oh!" Athenais flung the fan she was holding to the polished top of her dressing table. "If it will make you happy."

Following the directions Madelon gave her, Athenais found her way to a little used chamber off a side corridor. It was freezing in this part of the palace and she drew the heavy cloak more tightly around her. The light gown she'd put on for the King afforded her scant protection from the icy, stabbing chill. Waiting impatiently, she flung oaths at the walls in long puffs of steam. At last her patience had reached its limit and she stormed back to her rooms.

Madelon stood as she'd left her. "The son of a whore never came!" she fumed, throwing her cloak to Madelon and dropping herself into a chair to regain her composure. "Are you sure he wanted to see me now?"

"Yes, Madame."

A commotion in the hall alerted them to the approach of the King and, as Madelon rushed to put the cloak away, Athenais arranged her gown and composed her features. She would continue this discussion after Louis's departure.

In private Louis dropped the studied grace and imperturbable facade which was the only face seen by the majority of the Court. Athenais had long since learned that he was a man like many others with fears and insecurities. Now she sat on a brocade and gilt couch cradling the head of the King in her lap as she idly stroked the long, thick, shining brown curls of his hair. His eyes closed, the heavily embroidered coat thrown carelessly over a chair leaving him in his shirtsleeves, he looked less like a king than like a prosperous young tradesman. His majesty was a cloak he assumed from morning till night with few exceptions. Athenais was more than happy to provide him with a haven of privacy and peace.

"Louis?" her voice softly broke the silence.

"Hmmm?" he didn't open his eyes, content under the soft fingers massaging his temples.

"When are we going back to Versailles?"

One grey eye opened. "I thought you didn't like Versailles." He smiled up at her fondly.

"I like it," she assured him. "It's just so torn up all the time."

"It will be lovely when it is finished." His great love of architecture was indulged in the fullest at Versailles.

"Yes," Athenais agreed sighing. "It will be like a beautiful jewel."

"That reminds me." He gestured for her to hand him his coat and, from one of its cavernous pockets, extracted a diamond of unmatched clarity and size hanging from a lovely chain studded with smaller diamonds matched in size, clarity, and brilliance. Athenais recognized it with a thrill. It had belonged to Louis's grandmother, Marie de Medici, a gift from her husband, Henry IV.

Tossing the coat aside, Athenais took the necklace from him. It glittered savagely in the afternoon sunlight, seeming to possess a life within its fiery facets.

"Oh, Louis," she breathed. She had seen the jewel once before and had asked about it. Many courtiers thought her strange for not asking that the King shower her with jewels as gifts but she knew better. It was the jewels such as this, the stars of his vast collection, that she longed to possess and she knew he would never part permanently with them. He would, however, loan them to her. He liked to see them shine in the torchlight of a ballroom, accentuating a lovely throat, finger or wrist. And, in asking merely that he loan the jewels to her, Athenais could have the pick of the finest stones and settings in the world. Temporarily, of course, as long as she remained his favorite, but his favorite she intended to be permanently. "It's beautiful, magnificent. You're so kind to me." She wore her best humble look as she twirled the necklace in one hand and stroked his cheek with the other. Louis gazed at her affectionately.

"It's you who are kind to me," he told her.

A tiny frown crossed her face. Instantly Louis was concerned. "What is wrong?"

"Oh, it's nothing." She pursed her lips and twirled a lock of his hair around her finger.

"You must tell me," he insisted.

"It's Lauzun," she told him, "he's been bothering me to ask you why he was not appointed. . ."

“Grand Master of the Artillery,” the King finished.

Athenais nodded distractedly and Louis continued. “It’s very simple. I told him not to say anything about it until I announced the appointment. I didn’t want any trouble with Louvois. You know how my Minister of War hates Lauzun.” Louis sat up on the couch. “Apparently Lauzun told Nyert who is of course a great friend of Louvois; the next thing I know, Louvois is bursting in on me with fire in his eyes.” Louis shrugged. “What else could I do? I tore up the warrant. If Peguillin would not keep his word, why should I?”

Athenais nodded her agreement. “I see. Well, then, you had no choice.”

“None whatsoever,” Louis said. “I saw him in the corridor afterwards and I ignored him. I was more angry than I can say.”

“Then if he bothers me again, I shall wash my hands of it!” she told him.

Louis nodded his approval. For a moment all was silent, Louis obviously brooding on the subject. Athenais, unfastening the clasp of the necklace he had given her, began threading the diamonds through his rich, dark hair, nearly as long as her own. With relief she saw the good humor return to his features and the amorous light spring into his eyes. With a strength born of long hours spent in hunting and war, Louis swept Athenais into his arms and, carrying her to the bed, drew its velvet hangings closed around them. Athenais marveled at the swift intensity of Louis’s passions. Those courtiers who observed him at his daily routines often chafed with impatience at the stately, slow pace with which he moved through the day. Those same courtiers would, she was sure, be surprised at the change in him at these times. The time for conversation past, Athenais abandoned herself to the pleasure of being

loved by Louis and the knowledge that whatever pleasure she received from him, he received an equal measure from her.

Caught up in their pursuits, neither of the occupants heard or saw a disgruntled, disheveled Duc de Lauzun crawl out from his post under the great bed—the post which, with her deception, Madelon had helped him to. For, while Athenais had fumed in a deserted chamber a few hours before, Peguillin had stationed himself under her bed to listen for news of himself from the King. And now, trembling with rage at Athenais's lack of cooperation in pressing his cause to the King, Peguillin escaped from the chamber.

It was not until that night, while the court was being entertained in the apartment of the King, that Lauzun pulled the favorite away from a gaming table. Again she was fairly dragged into a distant corner.

"Well," he asked impatiently, scarcely hiding his anger, "did you ask the King about my appointment?"

Athenais threw him a smile as dazzling as the great Medici diamond she wore. "Yes, of course." She patted his cheek. "I begged, I pleaded. He has made up his mind however. You know how stubborn he can be. I think, though, that he may reconsider."

Peguillin wore an expression of cruel cynicism. "There is only one thing which troubles me." His eyes were hard.

"And what is that?" Athenais asked gaily.

He fairly choked in his rage. "It is that from beginning to end you have lied to me!" His teeth gnashed with the words.

Athenais gasped. She had not been so spoken to since she'd become Louis's mistress. Whirling haughtily on her heel, she swept past him toward the crowd. She winced as his fingers dug into the soft, white flesh of her

arm and jerked her back. His grip was firm and her fingers began to tingle as the circulation in her lower arm was cut off. "Let me go!" she hissed.

He tightened his hold. "Not until I show you that I know what I am talking about!" Suddenly his voice changed to a throaty imitation of herself. "It's Lauzun, he's been bothering me to ask you why he was not appointed. . .," here the Duc's tones changed to those of the King as he repeated their conversation in her chamber, "Grand Master of the Artillery. It's very simple. . ."

Athenais stood in dumbfounded silence as he repeated the entire conversation she'd shared that afternoon with Louis. He ended in her voice. "Then if he bothers me again I shall wash my hands of it!" He stood for a moment, enjoying her discomfiture. "Well, Marquise?" he asked at last.

With a mighty effort she shook him loose and started across the floor. Ahead she saw Louis in conversation with a group of courtiers. He leaned elegantly on one of the tall gold-headed canes he'd made so fashionable. At the sight of her, standing in the center of the room uncertainly, her usually rosy flesh as icily white as the diamonds she wore, conversation ceased. The King, following his courtiers' gazes, turned to face her. She took a faltering step toward him and he moved toward her. As he reached her, he saw Lauzun behind her and continued to regard the Duc as they exchanged a few hurried words. No one else in the silent room stood near enough to overhear them but they saw the King's usually composed face turn as red as his favorite's was white. At last, with a gasp, they saw Athenais slide gently into a dead faint at the King's feet.

With uncharacteristic unconcern for his surroundings, Louis gathered his Marquise into his

arms. "I do not want to see you here again!" he flung at the still-seething Lauzun.

"You will see me until I am satisfied as to why the King of France does not keep his word!" Lauzun shouted back.

The entire Court froze. It was not often that one saw a nobleman commit blasphemy, for surely to call the King a cheat to his face was blasphemy, and worse!

It was a challenge Louis could not ignore. Reluctantly he handed Athenais into the care of her household.

"This is not the place to air your grievances," he told the Duc.

"Why? Is it a secret that you do not honor your promises?"

The courtiers were excited. The Queen, whose immense regard for the sacredness of royalty was being tested to the limit, fanned herself furiously and looked as though she may, at any moment, follow Athenais into unconsciousness.

"I made you a promise!" Louis punctuated his words with the impact of his ebony and gold cane on the marble floor. "But it was conditional. You did not keep your end of the bargain. I owe you nothing."

"Then," Lauzun trembled, "there is only one alternative." He unsheathed his sword. The entire Court seemed on the verge of a swoon. Lauzun continued. "I will break my sword so that I may never again be tempted to serve a prince who cannot keep his word." Raising his sword, he brought it down against his knee, snapping it neatly in two. Moving toward Louis, he flung the pieces to the floor where they clattered loudly at the feet of the King.

Louis's face grew so red that it seemed he must explode; the Court held its breath. Never could anyone remember seeing Louis, who usually held his emotions

in such complete control, so angry. He raised the gold-headed cane to strike Lauzun. It wavered there momentarily. To the disappointment of many, Louis recovered himself and lowered the cane. "No!" he cried at the rampant emotions boiling within him. "I shall not have it said that I struck a man of quality!" Resolutely he went to the window overlooking the courtyard and threw the cane out. Leaning on the sill, he breathed deeply of the icy air to calm his raging nerves. It was a scene for the Court to remember.

It was also a scene for Lauzun to remember. The next day, as the Court still buzzed with the topic, Peguillin, Duc de Lauzun, found himself lodged in the Bastille.

Chapter IX

Athenais lay naked on a sheet placed over the satin coverlet of her bed. Above her a maid, her hands dipped in sweet, musky, scented oils, kneaded her white skin gently. It was a luxury she had begun allowing herself recently. She lay thus for at least an hour every day—her skin, already soft and silky, had taken on a translucent glow with the repeated treatments of oil.

"Thank you, Jeanne," she said lazily, "that's enough."

The young maid, child of one of her mother's maids to whom she had recently given a place in her household, curtsied and, collecting the jars of oil and scent, left the room.

Athenais drew on a robe of fine lawn and delicate lace. Behind her the door opened and Madelon entered the chamber. "The hairdresser is here, Madame."

Athenais winced. "Tell him just a moment," she said moving languidly across the room. She stood before one of the great mirrors which flanked the fireplace. Appraising her figure, she satisfied herself that she was still, at twenty-nine, a most beautiful woman. Her face was unlined by the mad merry-go-round of intrigues in which she lived. Her skin was white and unblemished, her breasts were high and full, her figure, although always inclined to plumpness, had recovered its slender-yet-rounded lines nicely after the birth of the

King's child. She smiled wistfully. Under the gently guiding hand of Françoise Scarron, little Louis-Auguste was, at just over a year of age, a delightfully intelligent child. The King loved him dearly, more so than even his son by the Queen. The Dauphin, it appeared, had taken sadly after his dull mother and was, at nine years old, an awkward and backward child terrified and in awe of his brilliant father.

Yes, Louis loved his little son by his beloved Athenais and soon, very soon, she would tell him that that happy child was to have a brother or sister. She had recently learned that she was again pregnant. She turned sideways to the mirror. It would begin to show soon. She didn't look forward to the expansion of her body, the long periods of forced inactivity, but Louis loved children. Although he found women in the advanced stages of pregnancy boring, she knew that he would be hard put to find her tiresome. And if he did . . . her mind turned to thoughts of the darker side of her circle of acquaintances. Over the years since her first contact with the witch La Voisin and her cronies, Athenais had never completely broken away from their society. She sent gifts of money and other items to the woman and, in return, often received the choicest of her potions and philters. One never knew when a new, young, and beautiful face would appear at Court, fresh from the depths of the country. It hadn't happened as yet but it was possible. For this reason, she slipped an occasional love potion or aphrodisiac into the wine she served to Louis when they were together.

"Madame?" Madelon's voice came from the door. She'd removed the protective sheet from the bed and straightened the coverlet. "The hairdresser?"

"Yes, send him in," Athenais sighed. She drew out the pins which secured her curls on top of her head and shook the long, silky, dark locks about her shoulders,

turning sideways once more to watch it pour down her back.

The hairdresser, Monsieur Pierrepont, was used by many of the Court ladies and came expensively. Still, what Athenais requested was a delicate operation which, if done incorrectly, could prove disastrous.

Monsieur Pierrepont entered the room bowing profusely. Behind him two gangly young men followed carrying cases which rattled, betraying the bottles and jars they contained.

"Are you sure you know what I want?" Athenais asked.

"Yes. Positively, absolutely!" the short man gushed. He was delighted to be employed by the King's mistress for if she were satisfied with his work, he would become the most fashionable hairdresser at Court and his pockets would soon bulge with gold.

"Come this way." Athenais motioned them to follow her to the tiled bathroom. The hairdresser moved across the room with an air of swift efficiency. His assistants, whom he had only recently had the means to hire and who were not as yet used to dealing with the inner circles of the Court, gaped openly at the beautiful mistress of the King. Louis, who seemed a god living in a golden heaven on earth, was an unearthly figure to his subjects and Athenais, as his mistress, was herself on the way to becoming the stuff of which fables are made.

Inside the small bathroom basins of warm water and soft towels had been put close at hand and Athenais sat on a gilded stool facing a mirror while the hairdresser and his assistants prepared for their work. At last they were ready and Athenais winced and closed her eyes as the hairdresser raised small, sharp scissors and the first lock of hair fell to the tiled floor.

The hairdresser and his assistants bundled out of the room and Athenais, not daring to cast a glance into the mirror, admitted Madelon to help her dress to receive the King who was due shortly.

Madelon entered the room and stopped short, gazing at Athenais through wide eyes. "Oh, Athenais!" she breathed, surprised out of her Courtly formalities.

"Don't say anything!" Athenais cautioned her. "I'm afraid to look as it is and if you say anything, I'll hide and be afraid to face even myself."

"You look so different!" Madelon could not restrain her comments, even under threats from her mistress.

"Just shut up and help me dress!" She was nervous and afraid that her sacrifice would be met with dislike and disapproval from Louis and ridicule and scorn from the Court. When at last the King did appear, Athenais was afraid to turn toward the hidden panel to greet him, covered as it was by one of the tall mirrors.

* * *

But Louis was not displeased and, that night at the entertainments in his apartment, the Court was treated to a new Athenais. As Madame de Sévigné wrote to her daughter, Madame de Grignan:

She wore a dress of French pointe lace, pearls and festoons of priceless diamonds. But what was new and much remarked upon was her hair for, where were formerly the masses of dark locks we have grown used to, there are now hundreds of little blonde curls. She has not only had her beautiful hair cut and curled, but it is also now the color of ripe wheat in the summer sun. What an uproar it caused! What heated conversation! What outraged remarks! I find her beauty dazzling and she has the grudging admiration of the whole assembly even to that of the Queen who, as we know, has the least reason to

praise La Montespan. His Majesty seems delighted with the surprise for it seems even he was unaware of her plans and he could neither take his eyes from her nor tear himself from her side the entire evening."

Athenais fell into bed exhausted but happy. Louis, who preferred blonde hair to dark, was satisfied with the change and, even though she missed the luxuriant weight of her long thick hair, she had to admit that the shorter style suited her looks and emphasized the dark glitter of her eyes. She'd been mildly disappointed to find that diamonds and pearls no longer looked their best wound through her tresses but it didn't matter. Emeralds were nice, and rubies, and sapphires, and garnets. . . She drifted off to sleep counting jewels the way others count sheep.

* * *

The labyrinth of Versailles was the destination of the Court's promenade. The King was anxious to see it, the gardeners and sculptors having finished it only recently. The courtiers followed their sovereign at a respectful distance while Louis himself was accompanied by the Queen and Madame and, behind them, Athenais and Louise de La Vallière.

Madame, the Duchesse d'Orleans, shone at the Court. She was slight in build with an air of delicacy. Although no one could not say that was was conventionally beautiful, she had a presence about her which made her seem almost luminous and a natural charm which those who knew her brother, Charles II of England, said was a family trait.

Athenais did not mind Louis's attentions to Madame—his brief love for her had run its course years before. Both Madame and Monsieur liked her and she,

although too self-centered to seek Madame's close friendship and the wrong sex to attract Monsieur's attentions, returned their respect and admiration.

The labyrinth was a marvelous example of Le Nôtre's skill as a master of greenery. Its walks twisted and turned in circles and angles daring even the most clever navigator to keep from losing his way. In addition, at various places within the hedge maze, thirty-nine groups of statuary represented the fables of Aesop, each group painted in its natural colors. When come upon suddenly, they caught the attention and aided further in confusing the unsuspecting intruder.

Louis loved his labyrinth, as indeed he loved all the wonders which had their being because of him. He took great pride in leading his wife, sister-in-law, mistresses, and courtiers through its depths, pausing at each of the statuary groups to explain its story to the Queen whose knowledge of such matters was sorely inadequate.

"You must discuss all this," he told Madame indicating the gardens with a wave of his tall cane, "with your brother."

"Yes!" Madame agreed. She was to leave, accompanied by the Court, to travel to England on a diplomatic mission. Louis had entrusted her with the negotiations knowing that Charles II loved his youngest sister more than anyone alive and it was natural that he should want to agree to a treaty if only to please her. Along with Madame, Louis was sending Louise de Kerouaille, a young woman recently come to Court. Louise was to be an incentive to Charles for she was, Madame had assured Louis, exactly the type of woman that attracted the English King. Moreover, she was loyal to France and Louis. Should Charles II take her as his mistress, she would prove a most loyal voice for France as well as an invaluable source of information.

Monsieur, the Duc d'Orléans, was incensed. He

argued long and loudly against Madame's trip but was overruled. He was persuasively talked into approving of the journey. It was not so much that he cared for Madame. Though in the early years of their marriage, when Louis had been in love with the English Princess, Monsieur had greatly prized her as something the King could never possess; it was part of a long-standing grievance concerning the banishment of the Chevalier de Lorraine, one of Monsieur's beautiful young men. It was said at Court that the way to riches for a family with lovely daughters was through the King's bed but if you had only sons, there was always Monsieur.

Athenais, for her part, cared little about the intrigues of Madame and Monsieur, she had other matters with which to concern herself. Louis had arranged for the proclamation of a bill of separation for herself and Pardaillan. It was a great source of relief for her. In addition, he had procured for her a post as Intendant of the Queen's household which, among other benefits, gave her the right of entry to the royal presence. No palace official, regardless of his station would bar her from the King even if Louis had expressly ordered him to do so. And that, she knew, was unlikely as they never fought and rarely disagreed. To have a woman forcibly kept from him would not only wound his dignity, it was against the very rules of courtesy of which he was the author and chief practitioner.

And if Athenais was the chief beneficiary of the King's good will, she was by no means the only member of her family to benefit. Her father, the Duc de Mortemart was now Governor of Paris, her brother, the Duc de Vivonne was Captain-General of the Galleys, the horrid floating prisons where criminals and captured soldiers spent their lives chained to the oars of warships, and Governor of Champagne. Of Athenais's sisters, the eldest, Gabrielle, the Marquise de Thianges, had left her

boring husband and joined Athenais at the palace; the youngest, Marie, was a nun but without a vocation. As compensation, Louis had appointed her Abbess of the great royal abbey of Fontrevault where she ruled elegantly over a large group of nuns and monks and also occasionally joined the others for intimate dinners in Athenais's apartment.

When together the three sisters, Madame de Montespan, Madame de Thianges, and Madame de Fontrevault combined the force of their natural Mortemart charm to devastating effect. It was said of them, "Madame de Thianges talks like a woman who reads, Madame de Montespan like a woman who dreams, and Madame de Fontrevault like a woman who talks."

Of all the company available to them in the Court, their favorite companions were each other and, when a new young Jesuit priest appeared in Paris who was a virtual double of their debauched brother Louis-Victor, Madame de Fontrevault took her sisters to hear him. Their shrieking laughter filled the chapel when they saw what appeared to be Louis-Victor delivering an impassioned sermon on the evils of debauchery.

Nor were her immediate family the sole beneficiaries of Athenais's good fortune. She arranged for the marriage of her poor niece, Mademoiselle de Thianges to the Duc de Nevers, a nephew of the late Cardinal Mazarin. She enjoyed dispensing favors to her family, being the source of blessings, both prestigious and financial and, since her financial purse was the government treasury, she could give with a free hand. But there was one wish, one favor that Athenais could not give, that must come from Louis or no one. She wanted to see Louis-Victor a marshal of France with all the glory and prestige that went with that title. Again and again Athenais begged Louis to include her brother's name in the appointments and she was always disappointed; she

was also determined.

"Louis," she murmured one afternoon when they lay on her wide bed, the cool breezes wafting through the window and sweeping across their perspiring skin. "Have you appointed the new marshals?"

The King lay quietly, his eyes closed, relaxed. "Hmmm," he answered.

"Louis," she persisted, jabbing a sharp fingernail into his ribs.

"Yes, I have," he told her finally.

"Where is the list?"

Louis waved one languid hand toward the chair over which was draped the elegant pile of his clothes. Athenais slid from the bed and rummaged through the pile until she found the blue velvet jacket with its spidery web of silver embroidery. She thrust one hand into the cavernous pocket coming out with an assortment of odds and ends. Dumping them unceremoniously onto the sofa she delved into the other pocket. A piece of heavy parchment struck her hand and, pulling it out she tossed the coat to the floor with the other garments from the chair and scanned the short list of new marshals—her brother was not among them.

"Louis!" she bounded back onto the bed jarring the King who, having dozed off, started violently. "My brother's name is not here!"

"No? Well—there you are," the King said, closing his eyes once again.

"Wake up!" she jabbed him savagely.

"I want to sleep for a while," Louis grumbled.

"If you don't wake up," she persisted, "I will sneak into your room every night and see that you don't get one moment's sleep. Not until you add my brother's name to this list."

Finally, more out of a need to stop Athenais's harping than a desire to bestow honors on the Morte-

marts, he took a pen from Athenais's writing desk and, dipping it into the silver inkwell, added the name of Louis-Victor, Duc de Vivonne. Athenais smiled, she had accomplished her objective as she usually did.

* * *

Madame, the Duchesse d'Orléans, was leaving for England and Louis, Marie-Thérèse, and a large portion of the Court were accompanying her as far as the coast. It was a beautiful procession, reminiscent of the journey to Lille a few years before. Madame rode in a carriage of her own, a splendid vehicle that glittered in the summer sunshine. Her husband, Philippe, sulked in his carriage, accompanied by a few favored young and beautiful men. He resented the attention lavished on his wife and had only a short time since allowed himself to be persuaded to give his permission for Madame to stay in England for two weeks rather than the original ten days.

Behind the coaches carrying the Queen, Madame, and Monsieur came a lovely gold and green coach carrying Athenais and Louise de La Vallière, the former, radiant and confident, the latter a pale ghost of what she had been in earlier years.

"Louise, you must eat," Athenais entreated the emaciated Louise time and time again. "The King likes to see people enjoy their food."

Louise raised her haunted eyes and gazed at Athenais for a few long moments, "Do you really think that he cares what I do?" she asked quietly.

Athenais sat silently. It was the first time she'd ever heard Louise openly accept the fact that she was no longer of importance to the King. "Louise. . ." she started and then stopped, not knowing what to say.

"It's all right," Louise assured her, the light of her

growing fanaticism dawning in her eyes. "At last I can begin to expiate my sins."

Athenais sighed and stared out the window of the coach feeling uncomfortable with the other woman who, she was sure, was rapidly losing her reason.

They were nearing the coast when the Queen's coach abruptly lost a wheel. Louis rode back to survey the damage. "We can't wait for repairs," he decided. "You will have to avail yourself of another coach, Madame," he told the shaken Queen.

"She is welcome to use mine," Madame d'Orléans offered immediately.

"No, you are the guest of honor," the King responded. "You must receive the homage of the people alone." He glanced about, his eyes lighting on the large coach occupied by his former and present mistresses. "You may be the guest of the lovely Athenais."

The Queen's eyes widened, her plump chin quivered, and she looked as though she might burst into tears. Athenais waited patiently knowing that, however much Marie-Thérèse might dislike an order of her husband's, she never disobeyed him. After a moment of standing alone in the middle of the dusty road the stocky little Queen turned and walked slowly toward the coach of her rival. Generously, Athenais moved to the side of the coach already occupied by La Vallière and allowed the Queen a tufted velvet seat to herself.

The procession started off once again and the occupants of the gold and green coach were silent, each staring out the window trying to avoid conversation with the others—it was an extraordinary sight and, when passing through a village, more than one peasant pointed to the homely Queen, the thin former mistress, and the beautiful beloved of their King and remarked to one another that on that day they had seen, together in one coach, three Queens of France.

Chapter X

"Madame is dying! Madame is dead! Oh disastrous night! Oh frightful night! When there suddenly came, like a clap of thunder the astonishing news: Madame is dying! Madame is dead!" The Bishop Bossuet's words echoed through the royal chapel over the sobs of the mourning Court. The stunning events might have been a horrible joke if one didn't know they had really occurred.

Henriette-Anne, Madame of the French Court, the Duchesse d'Orléans was dead. She'd returned only a matter of days before from her meetings in Dover with her brother, the English monarch. She'd returned in triumph and accepted the congratulations of the Court—and now she lay dead.

Athenais, seated in the chapel, heard the sobs of the Court. The grief was not feigned for Madame was the one person, perhaps the only person at Court who had few, if any, enemies. She had been charming, witty, her only grievances were against those painted, beribboned young men to whom her husband turned for his amusement and amours. And, not surprisingly, it was these

self-same young men at whom the finger of accusation was pointing. For Madame had been poisoned.

She'd spent her last day of life happily, still flushed with the successes of her diplomatic mission to England. On the eve of her death, so the story went, she'd drunk a cup of her favorite beverage—chicory. Afterwards she lay down for a nap and, upon waking, felt and appeared ill.

"Even Monsieur remarked upon her appearance and inquired after her health," Madame de La Fayette told the King brokenly when he arrived at Saint-Cloud. "She said she was fine and called for another cup of chicory. Suddenly," the lady broke off and dabbed at her red eyes with a lawn handkerchief, "she was seized with pains, horrible pains, and cried out that. . ." Madame de La Fayette stopped, aware that she had said too much.

"Yes, cried out what?" Louis prompted.

La Fayette cast her eyes downward, "That she had been poisoned, Sire."

Louis started and Athenais, La Vallière, and Olympe Mancini, Comtesse de Soissons and niece of the late Cardinal Mazarin, caught their breaths.

"Tell no one else what you have told me," he cautioned the informant. "I want to discuss this further with you."

The Queen emerged from the sickroom, pale and trembling, and gratefully took the comforting hand of the Comtesse de Soissons. Louis, followed by Athenais and Louise, entered the chamber of Madame.

She lay in her bed, her thin body barely making a bulge in the coverlet. Her head was flung back against

the pillows and in her great dark eyes could be seen the exhausting struggle she was waging to stay alive, a struggle which, if one could judge by the somber faces of the doctors around the bed and the clergyman waiting to administer the last rites, she would soon lose.

"Henriette," the King said softly, wincing as the huge, frightened eyes fastened themselves to him. Louis assured her that he would see that her children were taken care of, that her brother in England would be properly advised of the circumstances of her death. Then the clergymen moved closer, dreadfully eager to aid her on her way. The King turned abruptly and left the room. Behind him Madame spoke weakly in English to the Ambassador to France from England. The word "poison" was heard and Bishop Bossuet hurried to tell the dying Duchesse to concentrate on thoughts of God.

"I must stay," Louise told the King. "After all, it was Madame who first gave me a place at Court. And it was Madame who first introduced me to you."

Louis nodded his assent and, on being told that the Queen had already left, took his leave of Saint-Cloud. By tradition, royalty must not keep company with death and so he abandoned Madame to her priests and doctors as he himself must be abandoned when it came time for him to die.

The coach rumbled over the rutted roadway between Saint-Cloud and Versailles. Athenais, barely able to make out the features of the King in the dark shadows of the vehicle, was silent. Louis had been at least a little in love with Madame when first she'd married Philippe. It was said that when, as a young English Princess, she came to the Court fleeing from the Civil war in England which claimed her father's life, Louis had taunted her on account of her thinness calling her the "bones of the Holy Innocents" but, when the thin, gangly child gave

way to the slender, charming woman, he had seen his error. But it was too late, he had married Marie-Thérèse and Madame was already Duchesse d'Orléans.

"I will find out who committed this crime," Louis said softly at last.

"How will you explain it to her brother?" Athenais asked.

Louis sighed, knowing that it was diplomatically a catastrophe for the most beloved sister of the English King to be murdered in France, particularly by the brother of the French King, for Louis strongly suspected that Philippe had something to do with it. "If I find that Philippe is involved. . ." He stopped, his hesitation conveying more threat than any penalty he could propose.

"Because of the Chevalier de Lorraine?" Athenais asked. Madame had contrived to have Philippe's beloved Chevalier exiled to Italy and Monsieur had sworn revenge.

"Possibly," he lapsed into silence once more, staring at the passing countryside. "I've sent for Monsieur Purnon, Madame's maître d'hôtel. I will question him at Versailles."

* * *

It was the early hours of the morning when Athenais was awakened by the opening of the mirror panel in her bedchamber. "Louis?" The moonlight filtered into the room illuminating the King's figure.

"Purnon has gone," he said simply. He lay on his side across the foot of the bed, toying with the counterpane. He'd removed the splendid coat and waistcoat in which he'd gone to Saint-Cloud and was attired simply in breeches and a lace-trimmed shirt. In his hesitancy

Athenais sensed the worst. She waited patiently for him to speak.

"I promised Purnon that if he would speak the truth he would be pardoned for any part he may have played," Louis said at last.

"And?" Athenais prompted.

"I asked if Madame had been poisoned and he admitted that she had."

Athenais leaned closer, the better to hear the King who was speaking quietly.

"I asked," he continued, "by whom she had been poisoned. Purnon said the culprit was the Chevalier de Lorraine."

"But Lorraine is in Rome!" Athenais exclaimed.

"Indeed. Lorraine sent the poison to two friends, the Marquis d'Effiat and the Comte de Beuvron."

"Wait, I don't understand." Athenais paused to collect her thoughts. "Madame was poisoned and yet. . .and yet there were others who drank of the same chicory as she and did not die."

"Ah, that is where they were clever. Madame habitually drank from the same cup, a favorite. It was the cup which contained the poison, not the chicory itself. Although others drank of the same batch of chicory, none drank from the same cup."

Athenais waited for Louis to continue and, when he did not, asked, "Philippe?"

The King shook his head. "It is all we can be thankful for in this affair. Purnon claims the entire plot was undertaken by Lorraine, d'Effiat, and Beuvron. Philippe knew nothing of the plan because, according to Purnon, my brother cannot keep a secret."

Athenais sighed her relief. Although they got on well enough, she didn't much care what became of Philippe, but Louis would have found it difficult to deal with such

a situation.

The scandal of Madame's death was soon replaced by new topics of gossip but Louis, for some time after, seemed moody and withdrawn. Athenais attempted to cheer him by having their son brought by Françoise Scarron. Little Louis-Auguste was a delightful child, precocious and charming, and nearly a year and a half old. Although Louis loved the child and enjoyed any time spent with him, he would complain because he still felt it was not safe to acknowledge the boy publicly and the thought would soon send him back into his downhearted state. One afternoon he arrived at Athenais's apartments and called for Madelon to bring a cloak from the wardrobe.

"A cloak?" Athenais asked, surprised. "Why a cloak?"

"There is a stiff breeze blowing outside, it is a little chilly."

The cloak hanging from her shoulders, Athenais followed the King out of the apartment and eventually out of the palace. "Where are we going?" she asked as he started off into the gardens. "Have you a new fountain?"

"You'll see," he promised mysteriously.

As they passed, startled courtiers enjoying the breezy summer afternoon watched them curiously but dared not approach or follow. If Louis was with his mistress, it was most impolite to approach him uninvited. To walk in the courtyard under the windows of Athenais's apartment when she and the King were known to be together, *entre les draps*, as the Court politely put it, was known as walking

before the firing squad. And so, as the King and Athenais passed the fountain of Latona and moved on toward the near end of the Grand Canal, they were left alone.

The Grand Canal, a huge undertaking, had been begun two years earlier. Thousands of soldiers, put to work digging the immense waterway, had died of fevers, so many that it was said Louis refused to have exact records kept for fear of alienating his ministers' support of the project. But now it was nearly finished and it stretched away to a point far distant from where Athenais and Louis stood.

A small but perfectly rendered felucca floated at the dock, long and low, glittering, its fittings of gold and emblems painted in bright colors. The two lovers boarded the tiny warship and sat beneath a brocaded canopy. Once settled, the ship began to glide over the smooth waters of the canal, propelled by oarsmen concealed from view.

"And still you won't tell me where we are going?" Athenais teased.

Louis smiled. "No, you are too curious. Just wait."

She drew the light cloak more closely around her. Louis had been right in telling her to bring it.

"Are you too cold?" the King asked.

"Not, but it is breezy. My hair will be ruined."

Louis only smiled. The breeze was wreaking havoc with his long curls also but, Athenais was happy to see, he seemed to be enjoying himself for the first time in weeks.

The felucca halted after a short while and Louis led Athenais off the tiny ship. They were, as far as she could tell, on the outskirts of the village of Trianon in a remote part of the grounds of Versailles. Her curiosity was reaching a peak.

Louis led her away from the canal and up a staircase where they emerged onto a terrace lined with orange trees. Wide flowerbeds were everywhere filled with amazing quantities of blossoms. Wallflowers, jonquils, jasmine, and hyacinth perfumed the air until it made her head spin. The flowers had come from Louis's immense greenhouses and each plant grew in a pot buried in the soil of the flowerbed. In this way growing plants and blossoming flowers of all kinds were available at any time of the year. The beds and borders of the walks were a mass of color dazzling in the afternoon sun.

Louis passed the flowers with scarcely a glance—he who loved growing things—and moved on through the gardens. Athenais, wanting to pause and examine everything, was pulled along by his firm grasp on her hand. There were statues in the gardens, nymphs and gods, goddesses and animals and, along the garden wall were large vases. Suddenly she noticed a continuing pattern in them all. All the statuary, the vases along the wall, and the wall itself appeared to have been fashioned out of porcelain in blue and white. She opened her mouth to ask about it when they came into sight of their destination.

A beautiful summerhouse stood in the midst of the gardens. The main pavilion was a rectangular building, its walls and roof ornamented with intricate decorations of vases and statuary, small but perfect. To either side of the main building was another smaller pavilion similarly decorated, all with large windows. Surrounding the whole was a wall, topped as were the garden walls, forming a courtyard to the front of the main pavilion. The entire group seemed to have been created of white and blue porcelain, it looked fragile and exquisitely beautiful.

Athenais stood staring openly. The buildings were

obviously too small to accommodate a large number of people, even for a dinner party. "It's magnificent!" she said at last. "But what is it for?"

"For us," he replied simply, and drew her through the gateway into the courtyard and toward the front doors of the center pavilion.

The pavilion was equally divided into two suites of rooms furnished identically. The walls of some rooms were covered with tiles of porcelain in lovely soft colors, in others they were hung with brocades of an Oriental design. In each suite a large aviary was filled with song-birds of varied and exotic species. The two smaller pavilions housed the kitchen and accommodations for a staff, and there was a tiny chapel.

"It's so beautiful," Athenais said wonderingly.

"You haven't seen it all," Louis told her.

The two suites of the center pavilion were entirely separate with the exception of one room. Louis opened the many-paned glass doors to the room and entered, Athenais following. The room was furnished in the same blue and white of the rest of the tiny palace, the colors repeated in the walls, the carpets and the furnishings, with the exception of a great golden bed in the center of the room. It seemed to shimmer softly in the late afternoon light, the hangings, tester, and counterpane, themselves of gold tissue, picked up the light as did the intricately carved fourposter.

They stood in the room silently, Athenais's hand still imprisoned in that of the King.

"This is the *Chambre des Amours*," he told her quietly, a smile playing around his lips and his grey-blue eyes shining brilliantly.

"Indeed?" Athenais asked, returning his smile.

"Indeed," he assured her.

Chapter XI

The news that Louis had built a jewel of a palace for Athenais spread quickly through the Court. The Porcelain Trianon, as it was known, was a sensation and the courtiers eagerly awaited the day when they would be permitted to view this latest addition to the wonders of Versailles.

Louis and Athenais led the Court through the gardens. Behind them, Louise de La Vallière, escorted by her brother the Marquis de La Vallière, sulked, her downcast expression and red-rimmed eyes betraying her pique at this newest example of the King's love for another.

Ahead, as they approached the basin of Apollo, another group made up of the Queen and her ladies appeared. Merging, the two entourages became one and Louis graciously greeted his wife. Athenais, rising from her curtsy, stared with surprise at the Queen. Marie-Thérèse's customary hairstyle, the long, stiffly-wired ringlets, had been replaced by masses of tiny curls all over her head. It was a veritable duplicate of Athenais's own coiffure.

The Queen, seeing Athenais's startled expression, flushed and giggled uneasily. "I hope you will forgive me, Madame," she said in her heavily accented French, "for stealing your fashion, but His Majesty seems to like it so." She glanced from Athenais to Louis, obviously hoping for some encouragement.

"I'm flattered, Your Majesty," Athenais assured her.

"It's lovely," Louis confirmed, amused by the Queen's sigh of relief.

Reaching the canal, Louis and Athenais boarded a tiny frigate, perfectly reproduced down to the miniature, but completely operable, cannons. They settled themselves beneath a canopy embroidered with the emblems of the King while the rest of the Court boarded a fleet of equally small and perfect galleys. On the shore Athenais saw her sister, Madame de Thianges.

"Gabrielle!" she called loudly. "Come and join us here!"

Gabrielle de Thianges, only too happy to join their exclusive company, skipped up the gangplank and threw herself happily onto the cushions beneath the canopy. "Good afternoon, Athenais!" she gave her sister a cheerful hug. "Good afternoon, Louis," she smiled brightly at the King who, almost as charmed by this sister of Athenais as by Athenais herself, returned her smile delightedly.

The two women were not unlike in looks or temperament. If Athenais possessed beauty and wit so her sister was also beautiful and witty, though perhaps to a lesser degree. Either one was a charming addition to any company and the two together were first-rate entertainment.

The exquisite little fleet of ships started off on the canal. They would travel about three-quarters of a mile before reaching Trianon.

"You are naughty, Athenais," Gabrielle de Thianges began. "I should have been invited to Trianon before the general public."

Athenais shrugged, not thinking it incongruous that her sister should refer to the Queen and this assemblage of the highest nobility in the land as the general public.

“Well, there wasn’t time.”

Gabrielle nodded sympathetically and then launched into her favorite topic of conversation, the members of their family. For here there were only two families of consequence in France, the Mortemarts and the Rochechouarts, and the Rochechouarts were included only because of the high number of marriages they had contracted with the Mortemarts. “I can’t help thinking,” she said dreamily, “that on this day the long centuries of glory our family has brought to France is being rewarded. Of all the ancient and glorious names in French history, the Mortemarts must surely be the most wonderful in the nation today.”

“What about the Bourbons?” The King, who was after all Louis de Bourbon, asked hopefully.

Gabrielle patted his hand. “My darling, I am talking about the ancient lineages, back to the crusaders. The Bourbons have their beginnings only a few centuries behind them. Why, they are practically upstarts.”

Louis sighed. He would have liked to have been descended from Charlemagne but that could not be helped. That his family descended from the famous Hugh Capet who gained the throne of the then tiny kingdom in the tenth century was not to be scoffed at, but, in the face of this product of a thousand years of French nobility, he couldn’t bring himself to say so.

The ships arrived at Trianon and Louis and Athenais led the Court on a tour of their palace of love. The gardens, their scent magnified by the warmth of the sun, were heady and beautiful. Several courtiers found it necessary to move away from the banks of flowers, the perfumed air making it difficult for them to catch their breath. Refreshments were served on the lawns and games organized in and around the terraces and secluded bowers. And, if any noticed that at the height

of the afternoon the King and Athenais were absent, no one mentioned it to them.

It was evening and the Court had not ceased discussing the afternoon's expedition to Trianon. The King's apartment was open and music filtered from one room, dancers swirled in another, and yet another was filled with the moans of the losers and the delighted cries of the winners at the gaming tables. It was there that all decorum was thrown to the winds. Players shrieked, cursed, and tore their hair when luck deserted them. The presence of the King and Queen did nothing to discourage such behavior.

"Would you like to play?" Louis asked Athenais, for it was an odd night when she was not among the last players to leave the table.

"No, I think not," she told him. Her head pounded. "I think I'd rather go to my rooms."

"I will go with you," he offered instantly and, bidding the company good-night, Athenais retired followed by the King.

They passed through the corridor and were about to enter Athenais's apartment when, in an alcove nearly hidden in the shadows of the evening, Athenais noticed a solitary figure. She paused. "Who is that?" she asked Louis, nodding in the direction of the alcove.

Louis squinted into the shadows. "It's Louise."

They walked toward her and, as they approached, heard the muffled sound of La Vallière's sobs.

"Louise," the King said sternly. "Let us have an end to your mourning. What is lost cannot be reclaimed."

"I am going on to my room," Athenais told the King. She had long since ceased to care about Louise's tears.

"You built her a palace!" Louise cried accusingly, her eyes moving from Louis's face to the retreating back of Athenais. "You built her a palace and yet you don't even care what becomes of me!"

Louis regarded her coldly. Her never-ending tears failed to move him and even bored him now.

"You don't care at all about me!" the former favorite continued. "You don't care that I have no one to care for me, no one to keep me company!"

Behind him Louis heard the door to Athenais's apartments close. He longed to end this scene and join her. Reaching down, he scooped up a puppy which had followed him from his apartment and tossed it to the startled Louise. "Here is company quite fit for you," he snapped and, turning on his high red heel, left her and entered Athenais's apartment.

* * *

Athenais lay in bed, her curls brushed away from her face, while Madelon bathed her painful forehead with cool water. Louis sat in a chair next to the bed and held her hand comfortingly. They had been that way for a long while when a knock sounded at the outer door of the apartment. Madelon hurried away to see what it was and, in a moment, returned and announced the presence of Monsieur Colbert, the Minister of Finance, in the salon.

"What was it?" Athenais asked when Louis returned to her bedchamber.

"Louise," he answered. "She has run away once again."

It was well remembered that, years before, Louise had run away from the Court and sought sanctuary at the convent of Chaillot. On that occasion Louis himself

had driven through the night to retrieve his then favorite and return her to the palace.

"To Chaillot?" Athenais asked and, seeing the King nod, continued, "Are you going after her?"

Louis shook his head and resumed his seat in the chair near the bed. "No, I sent Colbert after her."

It was a wise move, Athenais knew. When Louis and Louise were first lovers, their children had been spirited secretly away from the palace by Monsieur Colbert, taken to his home, and cared for by Madame Colbert. Louise would see the Minister of Finance as a friend and perhaps be more inclined to listen to him. "Why not allow her to enter the convent? There is nothing for her here any longer." For her part, Athenais would be just as happy to be rid of La Vallière's long, moping face.

"How would that look?" Louis asked her. "If she left the Court? If she left me?"

Ridiculous as it seemed to her, Athenais could see that the King's masculine pride was wounded. She dropped the subject.

Louise de La Vallière, Duchesse de Vaujours, drove through the gateway of the massive grey Abbey and, alighting from her coach, requested an interview with the Abbess. She poured out her tale of woe to the sympathetic nun and, when her tears subsided, received permission to stay with the sisters.

She lay on a pallet in a small, plain cell and allowed images to flow through her mind. Louis in former days, loving and gentle. Her children—she'd borne the King six children of whom two survived. And her life, particularly her last visit to this holy establishment. But if she'd come to forget the Court and its ruler she could

not. In spite of good intentions she remembered the night, years before, when the King had driven alone from his palace to fetch her. Although she hated herself for it, she would at this moment have sold her very hope of salvation to have him do it again.

The morning sunlight began to stream through the narrow window of Louise's cell and, as was the custom of Chaillot, she heard the Abbess moving along the gallery outside her door, pausing before each sister's cell and striking the door with her fist. "Let us bless the Lord," she called solemnly to which the sister inside the cell replied, "I give Him thanks."

Above this sound Louise heard another. The sound of a heavy carriage driving into the courtyard of the Abbey. He was here! He had come! Louise pressed her hand over the frantic beating of her heart. The sensation made her breathless. Tidying herself as best she could, Louise hurried along the stone gallery to the parlor and, pausing momentarily to catch her breath and compose her features, stepped through the door and met Monsieur Colbert.

She didn't bother to hide the sinking sensation within her and allowed warm tears to course down her cheeks unchecked.

Wordlessly, Colbert handed her the letter which Louis had hurriedly written entreating her to return. It was a tender, moving note but, even as she read it, she was aware that Louis had not only thought it unnecessary to come for her himself, the stationery upon which the letter was written was undoubtedly that of Athenais de Montespan.

She hesitated, torn between a desire to return to the Court and a knowledge that nothing was likely to change for her there. In his turn, Monsieur Colbert spun for her tales of Louis's anguish upon learning of her

flight and his anxiety that she return. In addition, he painted her a picture of the dire consequences likely to befall him were he to return alone. At last Louise allowed herself to be persuaded. Reluctantly she took her leave of the kindly Abbess and, entering the coach of Colbert, began the long ride back to Versailles.

Louise was welcomed back to the Court by smiling courtiers, a gracious Queen, and floods of tears from the King and Athenais who embraced her and assured Louise that, faced with her absence from Court, they had suffered terribly. La Vallière lapped up the praise, drank in the welcome, and accepted the promises of undying affection; but it was not long before she realized that Louis's love was not for her any longer and threats of abandonment could not win back his heart. Louise became a figure of solitude around the Court. She was welcomed into any company she wished to join but seemed to prefer the companionship of her daughter by Louis, the four year old Marie-Anne, Mademoiselle de Blois.

The Court was hunting stag in the forests of Saint-Germain. Horses, riders, and hounds bounded through the dense woods churning the soil and crashing through thickets and meadows. Athenais rode on the outskirts of the hunt in sight of the King, while Louise, whose horsemanship exceeded many of the men of the Court, rode nearest the hounds. Emerging into a sunlit meadow, the prey, a magnificent stag, had been dropped near a pool of dark water. The hounds were called away and the Master of the King's Hunt walked to the fallen animal, knife unsheathed should it need its throat slit to assure the kill. Athenais stopped her horse a little away from

the dead animal. Her pregnancy, nearly five months along, made the sight of the bleeding stag unappealing to her and she had no desire to be present when the hounds were allowed to mangle the carcass.

She pulled the crimson Cavalier's hat from her head—its black ostrich plumes matched the black trim on her crimson velvet riding habit and the shimmering black coat of the horse she rode. Tilting her head back she allowed the sun's warmth to play on her face and throat above the high black lace cravat which spilled out the neck of her habit.

She sat quietly for a few moments and leaned over to adjust the flow of her skirt across the side of the horse. As she shifted her weight over the side of the animal, a pair of hounds behind her began to snarl and snap. In an instant Athenais's horse was rearing high into the air and in her unbalanced position she felt herself leave the back of the animal and tumble heavily toward the ground.

THE END

She awoke slowly, startled to see that the room in which she lay was dark with the exception of a few candles placed at a distance from her bed. For several long moments she was unable to distinguish the deep midnight blue of the tester and hangings surrounding the bed from the gloom of the room itself. A face, blurry and indistinct came into her field of vision and then another. Straining to clear her muddled mind, Athenais at last recognized the familiar features of Louis, Madelon, and Dr. d'Aquin, the King's first physician.

"Louis?" she said softly, a feeling of weakness flowing over her. She tried to raise her hand but it felt like lead and the effort required to lift it was too much.

"Don't try to talk," the King cautioned her. "The doctor has assured me that no bones are broken."

"I feel. . .odd. . ." she tried to put a name to her physical and mental condition. Around the room she saw maids bearing bundles of towels and sheeting from the chamber and, as her eyes widened, she shifted her gaze back to the King for confirmation of her suspicions. His face and the newly awakening sensations of her own body told her that her fears were correct. She had suffered a miscarriage. "Oh, Louis," she cried, "the child?"

The King nodded gravely. Legitimate or not, his children were precious to him and he felt their loss keenly. "Dr. d'Aquin did everything he could."

* * *

Athenais recovered quickly and re-entered the swirl of social events which nothing could disturb. Surprisingly, the only ones to express sympathy at her loss were the Queen and Louise de La Vallière, neither of whom had any reason to mourn the loss of her child, but both of them had experienced the same tragedy several times.

She rode with the King from Saint-Germain to Versailles and, entering the palace, found herself taken to an apartment on the ground floor beneath those of the King and herself.

"What is this?" she asked, finding it curious that the King should be so anxious to show her yet another new addition to the palace that he would not even allow her to change her dusty garments for clean ones.

"I have had a new apartment made ready," he told her, "unlike anything to be seen in the palace."

Grandly he led her into a set of rooms decorated in a style of Eastern opulence.

The antechamber into which they stepped from the

hall was white marble throughout. The coldness of the stone was contrasted with huge, lush Persian carpets woven in patterns of gardens and mythological beasts. In place of the usual barrage of gilt chairs there were cushions scattered about the floor and a great tapestry-covered divan. Gold sconces held torches whose flaming light lent a barbaric tone to the whole. The air had a bluish tinge from ornately fashioned incense burners placed on either side of the great doors, sheathed in etched copper, which had closed behind them. Athenais stared, speechless as the King led her from this room into another.

The next room in the apartment was black marble. It too contained brightly colored carpets but here there were several large basins with gold cabinets containing towels and toilette accessories. Ebony armoires were set against the walls and when Athenais opened one she found accommodations for gowns and suits and a number of delicately beautiful robes in silk embroidered with dragons and satyrs. The shades of green, blue, red, and yellow shimmered in the firelight of the wall sconces. Athenais longed to try one on but the King was anxious to go along to the next room.

Two more tall doors, their wooden surfaces hidden behind sheets of beaten copper, swung inward. Stepping through the doorway, Athenais gazed in amazement. The room was done entirely in mosaic tiles of every color. Around the walls scenes of mythology depicted Venus and Neptune, Apollo, and Diana. In the center of the room, which was softly lit by intricately wrought filigree lanterns suspended from the vaulted ceiling, was as huge, purple marble bathtub large enough for three people. Steps descended toward the floor of the tub far below the floor level of the room. Niches in the walls held urns and pitchers which Athenais imagined must

contain perfumes and oils although the air in the apartment was so sweet with the fragrance of the incense that it was difficult to tell.

Beyond this marvel there was another room, similar to the antechamber although with a feeling of more privacy and comfort. Its thick carpets and cushions were inviting, its lanterns giving a soft and shadowy glow. It was warmed, as were the other three rooms of the apartment, not by the cavernous fireplaces usual to the palaces, but by large braziers similar in workmanship to the lanterns containing glowing coals.

"It's unbelievable!" Athenais sank onto one of the fat cushions. "Like a sultan's harem!"

"Yes," the King agreed. "I look forward to entertaining here. Intimate gatherings, of course."

The fragrant incense, the lovely furnishings, all combined to make the rooms barbarically inviting and overwhelmingly suggestive. Athenais longed to lie on the cushions or throw herself into the perfumed depths of the purple bath. Tentatively leaning across the cushions she found that the tightly laced and stiffly boned corset she wore prevented such movement. The King, seeing her look of frustration, laughed.

"That is why the robes are available in the armoires," he told her. "If one desires to live like a sultan, one must dress like a sultan."

Sighing, Athenais agreed.

Chapter XII

Letter of Madame de Sévigné to her cousin, Monsieur de Coulanges:

“Paris, Monday, December 15th, 1770

I am going to tell you something most astonishing, most surprising, most miraculous, most triumphant, most bewildering, most unheard of, most singular, most extraordinary, most incredible, most unexpected, most important, most insignificant, most rare, most ordinary, most startling, most secret (until today), most brilliant, most enviable; finally, something of which past ages furnish only one example, and that example is not exactly similar. Something which we in Paris can hardly credit, and how then can it be believed at Lyons? Something which makes all the world cry ‘Bless me!’ Something which overwhelms Madame de Rohan and Madame d’Hauterive with joy. Something, finally, which is to happen on Sunday, when those who see it will think they are blind. Something which will happen on Sunday, and yet by Monday may not be done. I can’t make up my mind to tell you—you must divine it. I’ll give you three guesses. Do you give up? Well, then, I must tell you: M. de Lauzun is to marry on Sunday, at the Louvre,—can you imagine whom? I’ll give you three guesses, I’ll give you ten, I’ll give you a hundred! I know Madame de Coulanges will say, ‘This is not

difficult to imagine. It is Mademoiselle de La Vallière.' Not at all Madame. 'Is it then Mademoiselle de Retz?' By no means; you are far astray. 'Ah, yes; we are stupid: it must be Mademoiselle Colbert!' you say. Still less. 'It certainly is then Mademoiselle de Créqui?' You are not right yet. I shall have to tell you. He is to marry—on Sunday at the Louvre, by permission of the King—Mademoiselle—Mademoiselle de—Mademoiselle—now tell me her name! On my word—on my sacred word—on my word of honor—Mademoiselle! LA GRANDE MADMOISELLE; Mademoiselle the daughter of the late Monsieur; Mademoiselle, the granddaughter of Henry IV; Mademoiselle d'Eu; Mademoiselle de Dombes; Mademoiselle de Montpensier; Mademoiselle d'Orléans; Mademoiselle, first cousin to the King; Mademoiselle, destined to a throne; Mademoiselle, the only match in France worthy of the King's brother! This is a pretty subject for reflection! If you exclaim, if you are beside yourself, if you say I am telling you a lie, that it is all false, that I am making fun of you, that it is a joke and rather a stupid one too, we shall agree that you are right: we have said the same thing. Adieu. The letters which go by this post will show whether we are telling the truth or not."

* * *

The letter of Madame de Sévigné summed up the emotions of the Court when the forthcoming marriage of the Grande Mademoiselle and the wily Peguillin de Lauzun was announced.

"Peguillin!" Athenais called as she saw the Duc strutting through a gallery. She had long since forgiven him for hiding beneath her bed to eavesdrop on the King and herself and had no doubt that he had likewise for-

given her the months he'd spent in prison over the incident.

"The lovely Athenais!" Lauzun greeted her. Extending one velvet clad arm he resumed his stroll accompanied by Athenais in a velvet gown and matching cloak.

The winter was harsh outside the great walls of Versailles and, even with huge, smoking braziers of the corridors the palace was uncomfortably cold.

"What is this I hear about your marriage?"

Peguilin rolled his blue eyes ecstatically. "Yes! Everything you have heard, whatever you have heard, is true. I am going to marry the Grande Mademoiselle."

"But Peguilin," Athenais objected, "she is older than you."

"Five years. What is five years!"

She is forty-three. You must not logically expect a large family to come of your alliance."

The Duc laughed. "Too bad. Perhaps . . ." he glanced around them to see if anyone was within ear-shot. They were not. With the mischievous face the Court had come to watch for, continued, "perhaps when the old lady dies I will marry a young woman to whom I will give multitudes of children."

Athenais giggled, "You are impossible. But how did you manage to get the King to agree?"

Peguilin chucked her under the chin. "He understands about love, my pet. You should know that."

"I think you should be married as soon as possible," her tone was serious. "The alliance will not be popular."

"Ah, no," he waved a hand in the air to illustrate his point. "I have postponed the wedding. First, I must have new livery made for my household. Also, there must be preparations made for a Royal Mass."

"You are making a mistake," she predicted gloomily.

"No, I don't think so."

Athenais sighed. She could not support her predictions without divulging secrets Louis had entrusted to her within the confines of her bed. She knew, however, that he had no sooner given his consent to the marriage than his brother Philippe, Minister of War Louvois, the Prince de Condé, and the Queen herself had strongly protested the misalliance. In fact, the only persons at the Court who seemed pleased with the Grande Mademoiselle's wanting to marry so far beneath her royal station were the Mesdames de Rohan and d'Hauterive who had married gentlemen unsuitable to their rank and wanted the company of another royal lady.

"Well, frankly Peguillin," Athenais continued, saluting a passing gallant with the large sable muff which hung on a ribbon around her neck, "I can't imagine how you managed to become a party to such a marriage anyway. No offense but you are hardly up to the standards she's used to."

Lauzun agreed good-naturedly. "It's true, she's been offered the hand of nearly every sovereign in Europe. But it's not my fault that I'm irresistible." Athenais laughed but he continued. "If you really want to know, it was the Grande Mademoiselle herself who intimated that she was mine for the taking. She all but told me in so many words."

Finding an empty divan near a brazier, Athenais sat down. "She doesn't suspect that you are not madly in love with her?"

Peguillin drew himself up in mock indignation. "Who says I'm not madly in love! I am! In fact, I'm forty million livres worth of in love!"

"Forty million! What a lot of money! I knew she was rich . . ."

The Duc drew closer in order that they would not be overheard. "It's true. She owns many estates and jewels and a wonderful collection of plate."

"Plate!" Athenais was astonished. "You even asked about the value of her plate?"

"One must not leave a stone unturned." Lauzun assumed an air of self-righteousness. "I must know what my situation is to be."

Athenais laughed again, shaking her head in wonderment at the audacity of the cunning courtier. Behind him she saw the Grande Mademoiselle approaching. Hurriedly, she rose and took her leave of Peguillin hoping to avoid being drawn into conversation for she'd always considered this cousin of Louis's arrogant and ignorant.

* * *

"I'll not stand for it! I'll not!" Philippe d'Orléans paced up and down Athenais's salon. He was dressed in magenta silk with ornaments, ribbons, and laces of contrasting colors. His hair was curled extravagantly and wound through with ribbons. In his rage he seemed to be a bantam rooster, with exquisite plumage.

"Calm yourself, Monsieur. You will do yourself some harm," Athenais soothed. Since the death of Madame, Philippe, who had always gotten on well enough with his brother's mistress, had taken to visiting her occasionally when he was spending any time at Versailles. He enjoyed discussing fashions or playing cards with her. She, in turn, did not object to any but the most obnoxious of his young men.

"Calm myself! When this atrocity is about to take place?" He paused before the window and stared at the bustling courtiers in the Marble Courtyard below. "It is an affront to the blood royal!"

"The Queen herself has spoken against the marriage," Athenais pointed out. "And Louvois, and Condé, and yourself."

"And many more!" Philippe assured her. "Well, I can't stand to wait here without acting." He picked up his plumed hat from a silver table and clapped it onto his head. It stayed there for only a moment. Monsieur did not, as a rule, wear his hats. He carried them as a compliment to his suit but had the effect of flattening his curls if placed upon his head. "Damn!" he shouted and, rushing into Athenais's bedchamber, examined his wig for damage. Certain that it was no worse for its treatment he turned and, kissing her hand, bade Athenais good day.

Behind him as he left her chamber, the very mirror into which he had so anxiously peered at his wig opened and the King entered the room. Although Athenais had been acknowledged as the King's mistress Louis preferred to be uninterrupted on his way to her chambers.

"Good afternoon, Louis," Athenais smiled, rising from her curtsy.

"Good afternoon," he answered wearily.

"You are troubled today," she observed sympathetically. "Is it the Grande Mademoiselle?"

The King moaned. "I am beset on all sides! If I don't allow the marriage I will be hounded by Mademoiselle's long, tearful face. If I do allow it, half the nobility in France will be scandalized."

Athenais joined him on the divan. "It won't matter. Once Peguillin marries Mademoiselle the nobility won't have any choice but to bow to the new Prince of the Blood."

"Prince of the Blood?"

"Why yes," Athenais told him with an air of innocence. "After all, he will be your cousin." Seeing the King wince she went on, "And married to the highest

lady in the land save the Queen. Mademoiselle is a granddaughter of France—a Princess. And with the settlement she is making on Lauzun . . .”

“Settlement? I had heard nothing about a settlement.” The weariness of Louis had been replaced by interest.

“A dowry of sorts, I suppose. Peguilin himself told me. She is giving him the duchy of Eu . . .”

“The first peerage in the land!” the King exclaimed. “He will have precedence over all save Monsieur and myself!”

“Yes, and the duchy of Montpensier. He is already calling himself the Duc de Montpensier—and the duchy of Saint Fargeau and the duchy of Châtellerault. . .” Athenais ticked them off on her fingers.

“Millions, those estates are worth millions!” Louis paused, “twenty million livres at least!”

“Twenty-two million,” Athenais corrected sweetly.

“He will be the first peer in the realm!”

“Yes, the first peer,” Athenais smiled. “He will be the first man you see in the morning and the last you see at night.”

“No!” Louis declared passionately.

“Yes,” she pointed out, “as the first peer and cousin to the King he will have the right of the Grande Entrée when you are awakened and will probably hold your nightlight while you are put to bed.”

“I won’t have it!” the King declared. “I won’t! I shall forbid this marriage!”

“But you have already given your consent.”

“Then I shall withdraw my consent!” Rising, Louis left the apartment and, shortly, the Grande Mademoiselle and Peguilin de Lauzun were called to attend him. The word spread through the palace and speculation arose that Madame de Montespan had

worked what the Queen, Monsieur, and others had failed to accomplish.

"Madame!" Philippe d'Orléans burst into Athenais's salon. "I heard the news! You are marvelous."

"I, Monsieur?" She rose from her curtsy. "I can't imagine what you mean."

"Come, Madame, I have heard how, immediately upon quitting your apartment, the King called Mademoiselle and Lauzun to attend him. With the Prince de Condé as a witness."

Athenais smiled at him. "I merely pointed out the situation should Peguillin marry your cousin, Monsieur. If any action was taken it was entirely on the initiative of His Majesty. The marriage may still take place."

Philippe's face clouded over, "I hope it will not. I will never recognize that Gascony upstart as a relation!"

"The King may require you to attend the wedding," she said.

"Perhaps he may," Monsieur's eyes took on a devilish light, "and I will go if I am told to but I promise you that if the wedding takes place I shall wait until they have left the church and blow Lauzun's brains out!"

* * *

The Grande Mademoiselle left the palace in torrents of tears, attended by her women. Any stately graces she may have possessed were not in evidence as her wails could be heard the length and breadth of the palace. "I am lost!" she wailed. "I shall spend my life in misery!"

Courtiers, depending upon their attitudes toward the parties involved, reacted either with sympathy or smug satisfaction.

Peguillin took the news remarkably well. To any who knew him, it was apparent that he had an alternative plan.

Athenais learned of the plan when Lauzun came to visit her a few days after the fateful interview with the King. Louis, on the pretext of reading important letters in his private cabinet, had slipped down the passage and joined Athenais in her bedchamber for a rare morning together. They were discussing a new jewel he'd recently added to his collection when Madelon's head popped through the doorway.

"Madame!" she hissed.

"What is it?"

The waiting woman entered the room and with a curtsy to the King said, "It's the Duc de Lauzun. He's in your antechamber!"

"Lauzun! Tell him to go . . ." she paused. "It might be interesting to hear what he has to say."

The King agreed and, stationing himself near the door to listen, motioned Athenais out to meet the Duc.

"Good afternoon, Peguillin," Athenais said warily, she didn't know how much Lauzun would blame the failure of his plans upon her and nothing was past the Duc when it came to revenge.

"Good afternoon," he returned cordially.

Giving him a glass of wine, Athenais began uncertainly, "Peguillin, if this is about your wedding . . ."

Lauzun silenced her with a gesture. "It's all right, I hold no one responsible."

"You waited too long you know. You gave your opposition time to work against you."

Peguillin nodded, "It's true."

"You seem cheerful enough. I expected you to be torn with grief as Mademoiselle is."

"As Mademoiselle was!" the Duc corrected.

"Was? I don't understand."

The Duc finished his wine with a swallow and continued smugly, "Do you think I could let such an oppor-

tunity go by? Mais non! I have married the Grande Mademoiselle!"

"What!" Athenais was aware of the indignation which much be overtaking the King behind the partially closed door so near to them. "But the King forbade you!"

"Pish! I don't care." Lauzun stood up. "You see before you the Duc de Montpensier."

He strutted about the room and Madelon, on a signal from Athenais, burst into the room. "Madame! The King comes this way!"

Swiftly, with a hurried *adieu*, Peguillin was gone leaving Athenais to face the seething Monarch in her bed-chamber.

* * *

Morning found the mischievous Duc de Lauzun on his way to the fortress-prison of Pignerol high in the Savoyard Alps where he would spend the next ten years of his life. The same morning, and for the ensuing years, Mademoiselle could be seen and heard mourning the loss of her "dear, tender friend, the prisoner." She spent the greater part of her time absorbed in tears of misery for her lost Duc. So intense was her grief that it was said she lost any traces of the still-youthful beauty she had remaining. To all who would listen Mademoiselle extolled the virtues of Peguillin and openly sent him vast sums of money for his small comforts at the forbidding prison.

Peguillin, who was by no means a stranger to incarceration, spent his days drinking, gambling, and tunneling around beneath the fortress. At one point he came up in the cell of Nicholas Fouquet, the former Comptroller of France, imprisoned for aspiring to

achieve greater and more glorious power than his King, whom Louis had sent to Pignerol years before. It was said they had a marvelous time reminiscing and catching up on the news. But, for the most part, Peguillin enjoyed dissipating the money sent to him by his loving Mademoiselle. He adopted a fatalistic attitude toward it remarking, when his supply was exhausted, "Oh well, it doesn't matter, the old woman will send up a fresh supply."

Chapter XIII

Athenais stepped carefully from the warm, perfumed depths of the purple marble bath. She never failed to marvel at this haremlike set of rooms and smiled contentedly as she slipped into the embroidered softness of a silk robe. She walked slowly toward the doors which led to the cushion-strewn, Persian carpeted resting room. Opening them, she lost her complacent smile.

The King, having arrived some time before her, lay on the cushions staring silently through the windows toward the busy courtyard outside. He was also attired in one of the exquisite robes, having discarded his somber mourning in one of the ebony armoires.

"Louis?" Athenais said softly, kneeling behind him. He turned and smiled a wistful greeting. She said nothing further, his mood was obvious as it was understandable. One of his children, Philippe, Duc d'Anjou, had died only a week before. He would have been three years old in a few short weeks. He'd succumbed to no particular disease although many blamed the quickly degenerating state of the Spanish Hapsburgs of which the Queen and also Louis's mother were members. It was a familiar story—of the five children Marie-Thérèse had born to Louis, two had died within a month of their births. Now little Philippe had died at just under three. Marie-Thérèse, named for her mother, was nearly four and none too healthy. Only the Dauphin, the King's first-born and heir to the throne of France seemed, at age ten, a reasonably healthy child.

"If only the Queen's children could be as healthy as our little Louis-Auguste," he sighed.

"Yes," Athenais agreed. "If only . . ." she paused, about to ask him for the thousandth time when Louis-Auguste could be recognized, legitimized as were Louis de La Vallière's two children. Louise's children had titles, Mademoiselle de Blois who was five years old and the Comte de Vermandois, with whom she had been pregnant when Athenais had become the King's mistress at Lille.

"If only?" Louis prompted.

"Nothing," Athenais dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand. There would be other times when it would be more appropriate.

"Madame?" Madelon opened the door of the room. "Monsieur has been looking for the King."

Athenais glanced at Louis who languidly gestured for his brother to be admitted.

Philippe d'Orléans swept into the room in his usual whirlwind of lace, scent, and satin. "I love this apartment!" he gushed. "You are selfish to keep it to yourself."

The King smiled. Philippe was the family chatterbox and when he was present one didn't generally have to worry about finding topics of conversation.

Athenais dropped a curtsy to Louis's brother and his eyes ran over the beautiful robes she and the King wore.

"Oh!" he cried, running his fingers over the material and examining the workmanship. Philippe was a connoisseur of beautiful things. Athenais waited for the inevitable, for she knew he could never see something very lovely without making an effort to have it—she didn't have to wait long. "I must have one of these!" he decided. "And perhaps one for d'Effiat as well."

"You may take one from the cabinet in the bath chamber, brother," Louis told him sternly. "But if you

want one for yur friend d'Effiat, you will have to acquire it elsewhere."

Philippe pouted momentarily and then changed the subject. "Have you looked into the matter of another wife for me?"

Athenais raised her eyebrows in surprise. She hadn't been aware that Philippe had had the King looking for a new wife. She'd assumed that the Duc would be content with the two daughters the late Madame had given him, nine year old Marie-Louise and two year old Anne-Marie, and would now devote himself wholly to the Marquis d'Effiat and the other beautiful young noblemen who frequented Saint-Cloud.

"Yes, brother, I have," the King was answering. "I believe I've found someone. A princess of Bavaria, Princess Elizabeth-Charlotte of the Palatinate."

"A Protestant!" Philippe cried, horrified.

"She will convert," Louis soothed him. "She will also give up her claim to the English throne—she is in line after the Stuarts."

Philippe pursed his lips, pondering. "Well, all right," he said at last, "send for her." He rose to leave, his somber-colored yet lovely suit of dark satin swishing with his movements. With a profound bow he moved toward the door stopping when he reached it. "Monsieur," he addressed the King, "about the robe . . ."

"Yes, Philippe, take your choice."

Philippe smiled dazzlingly and left the room. It was, characteristically, some time later before they heard the outer door of the apartment closing behind the Duc d'Orléans. He had apparently had a difficult time with his choice.

* * *

"I shall never manage!" Philippe d'Orléans wailed as

he paced Athenais's salon. His high red heels made dull thudding noises as they struck the deep pile of the Savonnerie carpet the King had recently presented to her.

"Really, Monsieur," Athenais objected. "I don't know how you can feel that way."

The King was in a council meeting to which his brother was seldom, if ever, invited. In his absence, Philippe had decided to take his case to Athenais. The complaint was the Princess-Palatine, Elizabeth-Charlotte, Philippe's soon-to-be wife.

"You have seen her," Philippe persisted. "Do you think she is the right woman for me?"

Athenais hesitated. Philippe had a point, for he was small and delicately built. The Princess, whom the Court had ridden out to meet only a few days since, was an immense woman. "Robust" was the polite Court euphemism for she was much taller and altogether larger than her bridegroom. "I don't know, Philippe. I can't imagine how the King could back out of the marriage now. He has already made an alliance with her father, the Elector-Palatine. He needs the alliance to assure their neutrality should he decide to declare war on the Dutch."

"But that is no excuse to throw me to that woman," the excited Duc continued obstinately. "I tell you I shall never manage! She will expect the marriage to be consummated, you know."

His extreme concern and deadly seriousness made it difficult for Athenais to stifle her giggles. It made an incongruous picture. Poor little Monsieur trying to sweep the amazonian Princess off her feet. She glanced at the Marquis d'Effiat who had accompanied Monsieur to her rooms. While the King's brother was not looking she exchanged a wink and swift smile with the blondly handsome minion. "I'm sure you shan't have any trou-

ble," she comforted the Duc. "After all, you didn't have any trouble with Madame."

"Madame! Oh, I wish Henriette were still here!" Philippe leaned against the window jamb, apparently not seeing the irony of his complaining of the absence of the first Madame to his dear Marquis d'Effiat who was one of the conspirators to take her life.

"Nevertheless, Monsieur," Athenais said quickly, anxious to turn the conversation away from the dead Duchesse. "I am sure that you will be happy with the Princess-Palatine."

* * *

The King's apartment was filled as the Court of France fêted the Duc of Orléans and his new Duchesse. Athenais danced with the Prince de Condé who commented on the King's reluctance to leave the side of his new sister-in-law.

"Didn't you know?" she asked amused.

"Know what?" the Prince returned.

"It seems that our new Duchesse knows noting of etiquette. She doesn't know when to stand, when to sit," she shrugged, "and so His Majesty sits next to her and, whenever she should rise, he gives her a jab in the ribs with his elbow."

The Prince laughed. "Tell me, Madame. You are closest to the King and his brother. It is true what I heard of Monsieur's, er—shall we say, divine assistance upon his wedding night?"

It was Athenais's turn to laugh. "Yes, or at least the King told me it was true. Monsieur was so worried that the Duchesse's size would prove too much for him that he . . . how should I put this politely? He decorated the affected portions of his anatomy with several holy medals. Apparently it succeeded, she looks happy

enough to me."

Monsieur claimed the next dance with his brother's mistress. His clothing, always decorated, to the extreme, was glittering.

"You are blinding, Monsieur," Athenais told him.

"Yes," Philippe agreed happily. "Liselotte dislikes diamonds."

"Liselotte?"

"Hmmm. Sounds much better than Elizabeth-Charlotte."

"Ah, Monsieur," Athenais teased. "Pet names already?"

Philippe grinned noncommittally, "She is not so bad. If only she was not so large. But she doesn't care for jewels and so she doesn't try to borrow mine and she doesn't want those I inherited from Henriette."

"I shall have to get to know her better." Athenais glanced toward the end of the room where Liselotte d'Orléans and the King were conversing with the Princess de Conti and the Princess de Monaco.

"Come, I'll take you to her," Philippe offered.

Liselotte, Duchesse d'Orléans was, by her own estimation, an ugly woman. Asked to describe herself she said, "I have no features, small eyes, a short, thick nose, and long, flat lips. I have heavy, hanging cheeks and a large face. I am short and thick. To sum up all, I am an ugly little object."

Athenais, making her own judgment, decided that if the Duchesse had misrepresented anything in the description, it was that she was short and that she was an ugly, little object. For she was not little or short and, besides her, Philippe seemed to be her wife rather than the other way around.

"You are a lovely creature," Liselotte said generously as Athenais made her curtsy. "You know that you are famous throughout Europe."

"Really?" Athenais was flattered.

"Oh yes! And I must say that for once gossip didn't exaggerate."

Louis smiled proudly at her and looked at his new sister-in-law fondly. He enjoyed hearing Athenais praised for it could only do his reputation as a gentleman of taste and elegance good to have not only the finest Court in Europe but the most beautiful mistress.

"We shall have to become better acquainted," Liselotte continued.

"I would like that, Madame," Athenais replied.

"How would you like to come to Saint-Cloud for a visit? We could go for walks in the garden."

"Thank you, Madame, that would be nice."

"Is seven a good time for walks here?" the new Duchesse asked.

"Seven?" Athenais asked. "Yes, it's fine now, although it is always dark by then as the weather gets colder. And His Majesty's plays and dinners usually start by then."

Liselotte paused and then gave what could only be described as a guffaw. "No, you mean seven in the evening! I mean seven in the morning!"

"In the morning?" Athenais looked uncertainly at the King, unwilling to offend the Duchesse but equally unwilling to begin crawling from her warm bed at seven in the morning.

"My dear sister," the King said kindly. "I'm afraid you will be hard put to find a companion for walks at seven in the morning—why, I myself do not even rise until half past eight."

"Oh," the Duchesse seemed disappointed. "Well—perhaps we can arrange something else."

Athenais threw a grateful look to Louis who, standing, suggested they join the Queen and several others at the gaming tables.

As Liselotte, or Madame as she was addressed by the Court, became accustomed to the courtiers and they to her, she more and more abandoned her early attempts to impress others while depriving herself of her chief pleasures.

She discarded the frilly riding attire affected by the ladies of the Court and often rode out in male attire looking for all the world like a country squire come to Court. Once on her way, Madame could and often did exhaust even the most hardy hunting companions. She felt little or no strain after several hours of hard riding and was still enthusiastic when battle-hardened career soldiers were groaning and complaining of fatigue. For Monsieur's part, he didn't mind. He disliked such strenuous sports and rarely left the shelter of whatever palace he was in at the time. He did not, however, object to Madame's pursuit of such activities. They seemed, for such an unlikely couple, to understand each other and their likes and dislikes coincided for the good of both.

There were, however, a few of her habits which mystified, amused, and annoyed. While it was the fashion of the day for high-ranking ladies to receive guests while they lingered in the comfort of their beds, Madame was up and about the moment she awoke. Visitors must expect to be received while she was engaged in reading or writing the long letters to her gaggle of royal relatives or eating. She had, it was soon learned, a strong preference for the cooking of her homeland over the more delicate, exotic food of her husband's country. Disliking the fashionable drinks, tea, coffee, and even the chocolate Queen Marie-Thérèse had brought from Spain, she drank milk and beer and occasionally wine. She consumed vast quantities of sauerkraut, the very odor of which sent Monsieur scurrying with his fingers

pinched to his nose, and varied it with an assortment of sausages.

And still in spite of or perhaps because of her refreshing differences, most of the courtiers came to like Madame and she grew tolerant of them. She earned their respect with kindness and, when necessary, with threats. They learned from experience and from example, but there were a few who immediately hated the new Duchesse and weren't afraid to show her that hate.

The Marquise de Fienne, whose husband was attached to the Court of Saint-Cloud, stood in the midst of a group of admiring courtiers displaying her wit in the form of cuttingly sarcastic opinions of various personages in the room. The subject of the new Duchesse arose and, unaware that the object of her remarks was within earshot, the Marquise began to imitate her manner and her heavily accented French. Madame decided to make an example.

"Madame!" she called, entering the group. "You are a very witty person, quite adept at your little masquerades." She waited for the Marquise to graciously acknowledge the praise and then continued: "The King and Monsieur are not alarmed nor are they annoyed with your unique style of conversation because they have had time to become accustomed to it. I, however, am not accustomed to such remarks and unfortunately I become rather angry to see myself ridiculed. For this reason I felt I should warn you. If you continue to characterize me as I have just seen you do, you will have the gravest cause to regret your insolence. The choice is yours. If you refrain from your pranks we shall get on together. If you continue, I shall say no more to you but you will find your husband without a position in this Court." Leaving the Marquise agape, Liselotte turned and stalked off in the opposite direction.

Madame de Fienne's admiring group of friends who, only a few moments since, had been laughing merrily at her exploits now turned and left her alone, not anxious to be seen in the company of a person upon whom the eye of Madame was fixed antagonistically.

As for quarrels Madame might have with members of the royal family, she dealt with them efficiently. Her passion was letter writing, at least thirty pages each day to her friends and family. Aware that her letters were seized and opened by the King's police and occasionally by the King himself, she included her complaints and disappointments in the letters, sure that they would come to the attention of the King without her having to bring up the touchy subjects.

* * *

She'd been invited, by the King and Athenais, to visit Trianon, the choice attraction of Versailles in the opinion of many. The fast approaching winter made a trip on the canal hazardous as well as uncomfortable. So Athenais, the King, Madame, and Monsieur rode along the gravel pathway which led from the basin of Apollo, near the east end of the canal, and into which had recently been placed Tuby's great fountain sculpture of Apollo in his chariot rising from the waters.

The carriage wheels made a grinding sound which accentuated the noise of the horses' hooves along the path. Monsieur chattered endlessly and Madame, although gracious and merry, obviously would have preferred riding to Trianon atop one of the horses rather than behind them.

"We have news!" Monsieur exclaimed.

"Oh?" Louis commented, amused by his brother's buoyant effervescency.

"Will you tell them, Liselotte?" he asked.

"No, you tell them, Philippe," she returned.

"Madame is pregnant," Monsieur told them proudly.

The King and Athenais extended their congratulations and Athenais smiled inwardly remembering Philippe's cries of "I will never manage!" when first faced with his new bride.

They arrived shortly at Trianon. Athenais, assisted by the King, proceeded to conduct a tour of the rooms which had been prepared by alerted servants whose chief function was to have the tiny palace ready for visitors.

Monsieur, who had already visited Trianon a number of times, asked to see the gardens. They had recently had finishing touches put to them by Le Nôtre and were beautiful if slightly less rigidly formal than those immediately surrounding Versailles.

Madame, who had not previously visited Trianon, followed Athenais through the two suites of rooms. "You are lucky, Madame," she told Athenais when they arrived in the *Chambre des Amours*, "to be loved by such a man as the King."

Athenais nodded her agreement.

"Tell me, how is your little son in Paris?"

Taken aback, Athenais said nothing. Although the existence of Louis-Auguste was an open secret at Court, she was surprised that Madame would express an interest. "He is fine, Madame," she answered at last.

The great blonde Duchesse patted her hand reassuringly. "Do not worry, I've no intention of doing anything which might harm your son. But I want you to realize that you can be completely candid with me. I am not the gossiping type."

Still unsure of herself, Athenais could only smile.

"Does the King often come here with you?" Madame asked, suddenly changing the subject.

"Whenever we an get away," Athenais told her

truthfully. "It is not always easy to leave Versailles."

"Ah, yes," Liselotte nodded sympathetically, "A King must live always in public." She leaned closer to Athenais who sat next to her on the great gilded bed, "Do you plan to have other children with the King?"

"I would imagine so," Athenais answered. She debated telling Liselotte about her miscarriage and decided against it.

"Hmmm," Liselotte mused silently for a moment. "The King is much different from Monsieur. He is similar in looks but he is altogether more grand. He is a most charming, elegant man." She stared off toward the ceiling of the room on which was painted a sensual depiction of the loves of various ancient deities. "Is it true," she began again, not looking at Athenais, "that you and the King meet in an apartment in which there is an immense marble bath?"

"Yes," Athenais answered, wondering at Madame's intense curiosity about the King. Still, Louis was also passionately interested in even the most intimate details of the lives of his courtiers. Perhaps it was a royal quirk.

"Do you ever . . ." the Duchesse paused, a slight tinge rising to her cheeks, "do you ever bathe together in the tub?"

Ordinarily Athenais was adverse to talking about details of her private moments with the King, making an exception for her sisters and occasionally Madelon, but she had to know where this conversation was leading. "Occasionally," she answered truthfully.

Madame was silent and, to Athenais's disappointment, Louis and Philippe chose that moment to enter the room.

"Gossiping like old cronies," Louis laughed.

"Of course, telling all our secrets," Athenais smiled,

crossing the room to meet him and lifting her face toward his for a kiss.

"I suppose we should go back," Louis sighed. He was always loathe to leave Trianon where he could be merely Louis de Bourbon and pretend that Trianon and its gardens were the ends of his kingdom. "What time is it, brother?" he asked Philippe.

Consulting his watch, Philippe announced that it was early afternoon.

"It is our time together," Louis smiled at Athenais.

Philippe, consummate courtier that he was, snapped his fingers loudly, "*Mon Dieu, Monsieur,*" he addressed the King. "I have forgotten that I am engaged to have a sitting for my portrait!"

"You mustn't miss that," the King agreed good-naturedly.

"Come, Madame, you can amuse me while I am being painted."

Liselotte looked annoyed and a brief flame of rebellion in her eyes suggested that she was considering a refusal but, in the end, she went.

"I am happy that you enjoyed your visit, Madame," the King told her graciously as he and Athenais accompanied their guests to the door. "You must visit us again, often."

"I would like to see the apartment with the bath at Versailles, Sire," she said. "Monsieur has told me of it's beauty."

"Indeed you must see it," the King replied. "You are welcome whenever you wish." He raised the plump, beringed hand to his lips. In the reaction of the Duchesse to his touch and his lips, Athenais read her answer to the Duchesse's interminable questions.

* * *

They lay together between scented satin sheets in the great golden bed of the *Chambre des Amours*. The drapes had been drawn at the windows and the fire in the blue marble fireplace cast a red hue over their moist, still perspiring skins.

"She's in love with you," Athenais said softly.

"What? Who?" Louis was bemused.

"Madame. She's in love with you."

The King smiled at her fondly. "What if she is?"

"How do you feel about her?" There was an anxious note in her voice.

"Come darling," Louis soothed. "She is Philippe's wife, and beside she is not feminine, not such a woman as you. She could never be."

"She is only nineteen," Athenais said to the pillow, avoiding his eyes.

"And how old are you, grandma?" he mocked.

"It's not funny, Louis!" she insisted. "I am thirty."

"Not until next week," he reminded her.

"Do not mock me!" she cried. Snapping up a taffeta dressing gown which lay on the carpet near the bed, she eluded his grasp and crossed the room to fling herself onto a sofa near the fire.

With a sigh, Louis crossed the room and sat lightly behind her. "Athenais," he whispered softly into the blonde masses of her hair, "What has caused this?"

"I have been your mistress for four years now," she said, still facing away from him. "Every day I see new faces at Court, young, beautiful faces. I know that they want you. Sometimes when I see you speaking to one of them I feel a knot in my stomach and I wonder. I see Louise wandering through the palace and . . ." She turned toward him, "I do not want to be like Louise. I do not want to live with you when you choose someone else to share your life and your palaces and that bed with."

Louis smiled tenderly as the firelight cast silhouettes of them across the walls. "All this because other women try to gain my notice? You don't have to worry. I can't imagine life without you."

"You don't think I'm old?" she asked anxiously.

He laughed. "Old? You will never be old. Age will not harm you, you will only grow more and more beautiful."

Somewhere, in one of the other rooms, the birds in the aviaries were singing but in the golden *Chambre des Amours* there were no other rooms, no other people. There were no nineteen year old Duchesses and no moping ex-mistresses to remind Athenais that her place at Court was a transient one, and no weeping Queens to make her remember that the King belonged to anyone but her.

Chapter XIV

"Hurry, Madelon! I'll be late!" Athenais cried as she waited impatiently for the hairdresser to pat the last glistening curls into place.

Madelon, in turn, began to snarl at the bevy of young maids whom she ruled tyrannically.

A gown was brought, draped carefully over the arms of a young woman and Athenais, freed at last from the ministrations of the hairdresser, leapt up and threw off the dressing gown she wore over her chemise and corset.

Delicately, so as not to touch her hair or make-up, the gown was pulled into place. Of a rich royal blue satin, its overskirt was stiffly embroidered in an all-over pattern of silver. Split up the front, it was caught up and turned back to reveal a cream satin lining which also showed through at the elbowlength, slashed sleeves. The underskirt, of silver tissue, glittered with her movements and the blue satin bodice was decorated up the center front with silver embroidery repeating the pattern of the overskirt. A flounce of silver lace edged the neckline which ran horizontally below her shoulders, and matching lace fell from the sleeve ends nearly to her wrists. From her throat the great Medici diamond necklace shone and earrings, equally as brilliant, swung from her ears.

Athenias glanced anxiously into the mirrored panels flanking her fireplace and nervously adjusted a wrinkle here, a seam there. Behind her a sharp rap sounded on her door which swung open to reveal the King.

"Almost ready?" Louis asked strolling into the room. He was dressed entirely in gold, liberally frosted with diamonds, including diamond buttons and buckles. Even his stockings, which were cream colored, were embroidered with golden clocks. The only splash of any other color was the blue ribbon of his Order of the Holy Spirit which was visible beneath his coat just under the spill of his golden lace cravat.

Standing side by side with the late morning sun shining through the windows of her room, they glittered brilliantly, throwing rainbows of light over the walls.

"Where is the Queen?" Athenais inquired, putting her hand through the crook of his arm and starting from the apartment.

"She is coming. It always takes her longer, you know."

They walked through the galleries followed by a multitude of courtiers. A few times the King stopped to exchange a word with a minister or marshal. With his tall, gold-headed ivory walking stick he looked for all the world like a gilded shepherd leading his flock.

Ahead the Queen came bustling toward them appearing, as she always did, to be in an overwrought state of anxiety. State occasions filled her with a dread unusual in one raised as she had been to the ceremonies of a royal court. Left to her own devices she would much rather have led a life of chocolate and pets and her ever-present dwarfs.

"Madame," Louis greeted his wife who, returning his salutation, fell into step on the side opposite Athenais.

They passed through the Grand Apartment where, three nights a week, the Court gathered to gamble, dance, and intrigue. Through the Salon of Venus, done in mosaics, the gold and crimson Salon of Diana where the King's billiard table stood, the Salon of Mars in gold and green, and the marble Salon of Mercury. Past the

Salon of Peace and that of War in which was the wonderful marble relief of the King as Mars, his enemies trampled beneath the hooves of his horse. In the Salon of Apollo stood the magnificent throne of France, wrought of solid silver. It was eight feet tall, its base was statues of four children carrying baskets of flowers. At last they arrived at the Ambassador's staircase.

The Ambassador's staircase was a vision of green and brown marble trimmed in gold. Its first flight of steps was semicircular in shape, each successive step narrowing until they reached a landing. Here the stairway split with another flight leading to the right and left of the landing. At the back of the landing a fountain depicted Apollo and above that, on the level of the floor above, a white marble bust of the King looked serenely over the scene. To either side of the bust, narrow balconies provided observation platforms which were themselves flanked by huge paintings. Above these was a series of sculptures of gods, goddesses, and various exotic birds, painted in natural colors and larger than life. Above the whole an arching, exquisitely painted ceiling vaulted to great heights. The scene was intended to inspire awe in arriving foreign envoys and it had never been known to fail.

Louis, alerted to the imminent arrival of the latest embassy, stepped down the marble steps to the landing and positioned himself in front of the gurgling fountain. To his left stood Athenais, to his right the Queen and the Dauphin. The highest ranking courtiers filled the steps of both side staircases and the Ministers of State arranged themselves behind and to the right of the King. Above, in the little balconies, courtiers unable or ineligible to receive a place near the King jostled one another to catch a glimpse of the scene.

All was in readiness. The company, turned out in all

their finery, waited, disturbed only by the sudden and tardy arrival of Monsieur who slipped down the stairway and stood near Athenais. Madame, he explained, was indisposed and had remained at Saint-Cloud.

The embassy of the African nation of Arda moved slowly toward the shimmering assemblage of people on the staircase. Stopping frequently to pay homage in profound bows, they approached with the greatest show of respect. They were a rainbow of color, each dressed in a flowing robe of saffron or crimson, emerald or turquoise, and the clear, bright colors contrasted brilliantly with the rich mahogany brown of their skins. The Ambassador, easily recognizable by the obvious respect of the others in his party as well as the equally obvious superiority of his garb and ornaments, led the group. Their interpreter, a French Jesuit missionary, seemed as out of place among them as any one of them would have seemed among the throngs on the stairs.

At last they reached the bottom of the stairs, the lower flight of which was lined with members of the King's Swiss Guard. Bowing low, the group ascended to the center of the lower flight where, by a courtly nod of his head which caused the cream ostrich plumes on his golden hat to swish, the King graciously acknowledged their presence.

They had come, they informed His Majesty through the interpreter, on behalf of their master, the King of Arda. Upon hearing of the conquest of Candia in the Mediterranean by the French, their King had become anxious to obtain the friendship of this most powerful King of France and to request his help in routing the Dutch and English settlers who were invading his coasts. Toward this goal, they had brought gifts for His Majesty which they hoped would prove them worthy of his attention.

The courtiers leaned closer, they loved the sight of the

rich gifts which the various embassies brought to the King. Their greedy eyes glittered.

At a sign from the Ambassador, the gifts for the King were brought.

For his menagerie, they presented the King with a tiger carried in a kind of sedan-chair cage by bearers. The mammoth animal paced the tiny confines of the cage looking with greedy hunger at the shining morsels who gasped with his every growl. The tiger was followed by a panther whose sleek, black coat shone like polished ebony and whose black-slitted, yellow eyes swept the room warily. Lasty, there was a pair of Nubian lions, sleek and graceful. The hushed undertone of comment from the courtiers was stopped suddenly when the lion gave forth a deafening roar. Only the King who, in such situations, seemed made of stone didn't start at the sound.

In addition to the animals there were gifts of gorgeous ornaments and knickknacks wrought of gold with precious stones studding their surfaces and cut and rough precious stones of great size and value.

The King, through the interpreter, thanked them and charged them to thank their master.

Turning their attention now to the Queen, they presented her with a pheasant of an unusual golden color. Upon being brought closer on the arm of the trainer, the bird startled everyone by laughing exactly like a human being. The Queen, unable to maintain the composure displayed by her husband, squealed delightedly and reached out a chubby hand toward the bird. She was promptly bitten. Blinking in surprise she resumed her place and smiled uncertainly in thanks. She was then presented with what was, to her, the greatest gift of all. A Moorish dwarf, his dark skin contrasting with the yellow robe he wore, made his way up the stairs and bowed low before his new mistress. No more than three

feet tall his sudden series of somersaults and leaps caused the Queen to clap her hands excitedly and bounce with glee. She thanked the Ambassador childishly and called the little man, whose name she was told was Osman, to her side.

The courtiers began to fidget, expecting the King to invite the embassy on a tour of Versailles but, as Louis would have spoken, the interpreter was again called into use by the Ambassador. He listened to the words and glanced uncertainly at the King. His face grew red and he hurriedly spoke to the Ambassador who seemed annoyed by the delay. At last the interpreter again addressed the King.

"Your Majesty, it seems there are more gifts to be presented."

"Indeed?" the King raised one eyebrow.

"The Ambassador wishes me to express the best wishes and most profound respects to Madame de Montespan, the," he glanced again at the Ambassador and continued, "second wife of the King."

Athenais's eyes popped as she and Monsieur were snapped to attention from a whispered conversation. The Queen's childishly open face expressed her surprise and even Louis whose slumberous eyes seldom opened more than halfway was amazed and wide-eyed. A buzz went up through the ranks of the courtiers, the words of the Ambassador being transmitted up the stairs to the balconies above. Louis recovered his composure and, an amused smile twitching at the corners of his mouth, turned and drew Athenais further toward the front of the landing.

Slaves bore in the gifts meant for her which included a string of pearls all exactly alike and each as large as the end of her thumb. It was, she estimated, long enough to reach around her neck many times and still have two or three loops cascading toward her waist. Then were

brought two bracelets of diamonds, emeralds, and rubies set in golden bands of exotic design. Lastly, borne on a cushion of dark fabric, came a sapphire. Pale blue and weighing over a pound, it evoked a gasp from the assembled courtiers which sounded like a whooshing sigh.

Breathlessly, Athenais thanked the Ambassador and, unable to resist, plucked the heavy stone from its resting place and weighed it in her hand. Monsieur took it from her and then passed it on to the King who examined it closely and returned it to Athenais.

She replaced the magnificent gem on the cushion. Her curiosity overwhelming her, she addressed the interpreter. "Please, ask the Ambassador where his King heard of me."

Dutifully the interpreter engaged in a lengthy discussion with the representatives asking questions and clarifying points. Finally he turned to her:

"The Ambassador tells me that there were, a short time ago, three traveling French missionaries who came to Arda. They resided for two months with the King who questioned them at length on the subject of France and its sovereign. The discussions became more detailed until various personages of the Court were discussed. When you were mentioned, the missionaries told the King that you were His Majesty's second wife." He gestured toward the gems just presented to her. "The missionaries themselves selected these gifts for you."

Thoughtfully, Athenais thanked the Ambassador once again. The King chose this moment to invite the embassy to view his palace and, descending the staircase, he led the promenade with Athenais on his arm and the Queen accompanied by Monsieur and her new dwarf, Osman.

Emerging into the full, bright sunlight of the afternoon, the King and Athenais were blinding as his golden

garments and her silver ones caught and reflected the light. They left the palace and, crossing the terrace between two bubbling fountains, descended the shallow staircase to stroll gracefully toward the fountain of Latona.

It was a glorious autumn day. The leaves were golds, oranges, and reds heralding the cold weather which everyone expected any day, but today it was warm, surprisingly so for the final days of October. The courtiers in their satins, brocades, and a sprinkling of velvets, needed only light cloaks pulled around themselves.

Through the the interpreter the King explained the story of Latona to the embassy and moved on. In the course of their tour the embassy saw the orangery, the Labyrinth, and the basin of Apollo. They were shown the beautiful Grotto of Thetis in which larger-than-life sculptures had recently been placed. They depicted Apollo, reclining gracefully, attended by a number of lovely nymphs and flanked by powerful horses freed of the harnesses with which they pulled the chariot of the god. The water running briskly through the water-organ filled the temple with sound to the delight of the African embassy.

Next, the King took his guests to the Menagerie to allow them to inspect the new home of the animals they had given him. The Ambassador, in his turn, promised the King that they would, immediately upon their arrival in Arda, inform their King of which animals, native to their vast savannas, the Menagerie was lacking. They assured Louis that he would soon receive a number of exotic and unique beasts to add to his collection.

Along every pathway, the representatives of the African monarch had expressed their amazement at the abundance of flowers which lined their way. Athenais could sense rather than see the pride these compliments

evoked in the King. The Ambassador, had he conciously tried, could not have picked so happy a subject upon which to compliment the French King than his gardens.

Leaving the Menagerie, the King took the Ambassador and the mob of courtiers who followed to the south-reaching branch of the grand canal which ended a short distance from his animal collection. A small fleet of tiny, gilded barges awaited them. Although Athenais preferred, as she knew the King did, the more ornate galleys, feluccas, and frigates which were available for traversing the canal, the sheer numbers present made the greater capacity of the flat barges more practical.

The King, with a grandly graceful gesture, motioned the Ardan embassy aboard the first barge which bore the King's monogram—the interlaced Ls—and the symbol of the blazing sun which was a recurring theme at Versailles. He also, with a scarcely noticeable gesture, invited Athenais to join them. Ordinarily the Queen would have had this pleasure and ordinarily her chin would have begun to quiver and her eyes to fill at the sight of him inviting his mistress rather than his wife. But Marie-Thérèse was engrossed in the antics of the little Moorish dwarf. After insisting that he accompany them, she seemed content to ride in one of the other barges in order that her new plaything might frolic at his leisure.

The excursion to Trianon was the usual one, the cries of admiration emitted from those whose first visit it was had become a foregone conclusion and Athenais was relieved when the King suggested they all return to the palace.

* * *

Athenais was leaving the crowded apartment of the King. It was a welcome prerogative of the royal favorite

that she need not fear reprisal for disappearing into the comfort and peace of her own rooms before the entertainments were finished.

The King was still graciously entertaining the Ardan delegation. After saying her goodnights and expressing her thanks to the Ambassador once again, she started for her rooms.

"Madame!" Philippe d'Orléans appeared beside her. "Would you like to join me in a game of chance?"

"Thank you, Monsieur," Athenais answered, pausing. "However, I am afraid I will have to decline. I am furiously tired."

"Just one? Just a short game?" he leaned closer. "Perhaps a game of *hocca*?"

"*Hocca*?" Athenais raised her eyebrows. *Hocca*, a roulettelike game, was a favorite of the courtiers. It was also the most crooked game they played. "Monsieur, I couldn't! After all, *hocca* is not an honest game. It has been banned by the Pope!"

Philippe smiled a roguish smile and shrugged, "Well? But so have you, Madame."

"No," she corrected him. "Not by the Pope, just by Bishop Bossuet. I'm sorry, Monsieur, but I have already bid the King goodnight. Just out of curiosity, though, what stakes did you have in mind?"

"I wanted to play for that big sapphire you got today."

Athenais laughed, "No, Monsieur, don't cast your eyes on that stone! I may need it someday to support me in my old age." Laughing, she bade the King's brother goodnight.

Traversing the chilly corridor swiftly, she entered the welcome calm of her apartment. Madelon, napping near the fireplace in the salon, snapped awake and rose to call the maids.

"Madelon," Athenais said. "Don't call them. I've

had enough chattering and giggling for one day."

Slowly she walked to her bedchamber leaving Madelon to lock the double entrance doors and extinguish the candelabra. Gratefully she pulled off her satin bodice and skirt and stepped from her stiff silver tissue underskirt and fluffy petticoats. Madelon, arriving in the chamber, unlaced her restrictively boned corset and, with a sigh, Athenais drew a deep, unrestricted breath.

"The best part of State occasions," she told Madelon as she sat in front of her dressing table, "is when they are over!"

"I think the best part is getting presents!" Madelon replied. She glanced at the case containing the African bracelets and pearls and the huge sapphire gleaming in the candlelight.

Athenais agreed. Setting down her ivory and gold brush, she slipped off her chemise and pulled on a delicately printed lawn nightdress. It flowed around her to the floor and the wide belled sleeves swished as she moved across the room to the table where the gifts had been deposited. She examined the wondrous perfection of the sapphire wondering exactly what she could do with it. It was too valuable to display on a table in her apartment and yet she didn't want it cut to make smaller, more useable stones. Use it to support herself in her old age? That's what she told Philippe but the words weren't funny, not when one was alone in the night. She shook off the morbid thoughts and replaced the stone on its cushion. Choosing instead the pearly necklace she took it to the mirrors and wound it round and round her throat until her neck was covered from shoulder to chin; it still hung past her waist. Unwinding it, she tried looping it in long cascades and in this fashion it covered the front of her nightdress with a layer of translucent whiteness. Shrugging, she said goodnight to Madelon

and, as the door closed behind her, climbed into her warmed bed.

She must have fallen asleep for the soft chiming of the clock in the antechamber told her it was two in the morning when she heard a light tapping behind the mirrored panel near the fireplace.

"Yes?" she called, knowing that if it were the King he would just enter the room.

The panel opened silently and Bontemps, the aged Valet de Chambre, bowed from the doorway. "Madame, my master requests that you come with me."

Athenais jumped from the bed, her feet striking the coolness of the carpet. She stuck her feet into a pair of fur-lined mules. After pausing before the dressing table to brush her hair, she drew a fur and velvet cloak from an armoire and followed the valet.

Although the weather had been warm enough during the day, the night was chilly. In the darkness of the hidden passageway the valet's candle sowed their frosty breaths in the biting air. Athenais drew her cloak closer around her.

The panel which led into the King's bedchamber stood open and Bontemps stopped in the narrow passage to allow her to enter first. Louis sat in an armchair near the fire. Dressed in his cream lawn nightshirt and purple velvet dressing gown, he was unrecognizable as the golden deity of the previous afternoon.

Bontemps, after securing the panel in the wall, bowed to the King and Athenais and left the room for the antechamber. His cot, upon which he ordinarily slept at the foot of the King's bed, was visible through the open door for an instant.

Athenais sank to her knees on the floor near the King's chair. Resting her fist on his knee and her chin on her fist, she gazed up at him. "Is something wrong?"

she asked.

"No," he answered, "why?"

"It's just unusual for me to be called here in the night. You must be brave to want to face the Queen's tears and reproaches for not visiting her tonight."

"I did visit her," he replied, a slight sullenness to his voice which told her there was more to be said.

"And?"

"She is so busy playing with that damned little Morish midget that she didn't seem to care if I stayed or not."

Athenais's lips longed to curve into a smile. Here was a man, the most powerful King in the world, who normally was bored with his childish lump of a Queen. And yet his feelings and pride were so delicate that when that same childish Queen would rather play with a new toy than entertain him he grew sullen and hurt. With difficulty she managed to look serious. "I have an idea," she said brightly. "Why don't we combine the gifts of the Africans."

"Combine them?"

"Yes! Let's feed Osman the dwarf to your new lions!"

Louis laughed and stroked her hair. "Perhaps we could make a fête of it. An ancient ritual—Osman could be the star, he could play the human sacrifice!"

They laughed and, rising, strolled to the tall sets of French windows which overlooked the Marble Courtyard. It was deserted and the windows of the palace were dark. The moonlight illuminated the statues along the walls of the palace endowing them with an eerie life of their own.

Athenais turned from the view and faced Louis. Gently she brushed the long brown curls back over his shoulders and watched the moonlight play across his features.

"I see you are enchanted with the gifts of the Ambassador, also," he murmured.

Looking down, Athenais saw that her cloak, having fallen open, revealed the cascades of pearls she'd forgotten to remove. "Yes, I am happy to be the 'second wife' of the King."

"Are you hungry?" Louis asked suddenly, remembering the large plate of food left in his room in case he awoke during the night.

Athenais looked across the room where, on a table, sat a platter containing loaves of bread, two bottles of wine and one of water, a cold roast fowl, some fruit, and a few hard boiled eggs. "No, not really. Are you changing the subject?"

He smiled fondly, "No, I'm sorry. I'm glad you're my second wife, whatever that means. I'm just very tired."

"Shall I leave?" she asked.

"No, come with me." He led her by the hand to the big gold fourposter with its white hangings and plumes decorating the four corners. Above, the flickering firelight and dim illumination afforded by the candle near the bed barely lit up the expansive ceiling paintings of the King in scenes of bravery and grandeur. The figures appeared ghostly and, as the light flickered, seemed almost to move and come alive.

Mounting the steps they passed the gilded balustrade and crossed the ruelle, the narrow space between the balustrade and the bed. Discarding his dressing gown, Louis clambered into the high bed. On the other side, Athenais draped her cloak over the balustrade and, sitting on the edge of the bed, kicked off her slippers. Turning, she slipped beneath the satin coverlet and pulled it over herself. The weight of the pearls reminded her of their presence and, raising herself upon her elbow, she unwound them and dropped them over the side of the

bed.

Wordlessly the King moved toward her and placed his head against her shoulder. She realized with a start exactly how much the indifference of the Queen had wounded him and stroked the side of his cheek as she would a child's. She cast about in her mind for something she could do, something which would make his mind abandon the hurt he felt.

"Louis?" she said softly. He hadn't moved and she thought he might have fallen asleep.

"Yes?" he answered.

"I am not absolutely sure, it's too soon, but I think I am going to have another child."

"Really? When?"

"The middle of June, though as I say I'm not absolutely sure."

"Wait, I'll be back." He slipped from the bed and went to the table where the platter of food sat. Returning with one of the bottles of wine and the goblet he clambered back under the coverlet. "There's only one goblet," he said. "But that's all right." Opening the bottle he filled the goblet and they took turns drinking the sweet, red fluid. When they'd finished, he sat the bottle and goblet on the floor and they snuggled back into the warm softness of the bed.

"Goodnight," Louis said sleepily. Athenais made as if to leave the bed but he caught her back to him. "Where are you going?"

"I must return to my rooms," she told him. "After all, when the courtiers arrive for the levee I don't want them to find me here."

The King shook his head. "It's all right. I've told Bontemps to wake you before the levee. You will have time to leave."

Smiling, Athenais settled back against the satin

covered pillows and was drawn into the warm circle of the King's arms.

"Goodnight, Louis," she whispered.

"Goodnight, Athenais," he returned. "You make me very happy."

It was very cold when Athenais was awakened by the whispered calls of Bontemps. The fire had died down and the royal woodbearers, whose duty it was to bring in the wood and light the fire, would not arrive for an hour. As she came awake Athenais realized that her upper body was freezing for Louis habitually slept with the coverlet around his hips regardless of the temperature and so she also was only protected from the cold by the light material of her nightdress. Hurriedly she pulled her heavy velvet and fur cloak around herself and slipped her feet into the welcome softness of her fur-lined mules. Stooping, she retrieved her pearls and stashed them in an inside pocket of the cloak.

"Thank you for waking me, Monsieur Bontemps." She smiled at the aged man who made a courtly bow. He was well versed in the ways of the Court for his father had been the First Valet de Chambre to Louis XIII and his son Louis-Alexandre was even now being groomed to step into the position when he himself was unable to perform his duties.

Athenais walked around the big bed and paused before leaving its ruelle. Louis was asleep. His face in slumber rest lost every trace of the haughtiness it displayed during the day. He seemed innocent, trusting, almost a child. Leaning over him she brushed a stray curl from his forehead and kissed him softly under the approving gaze of Bontemps.

Leaving the bedchamber she stepped through the open panel and followed the valet to her own apartment. She passed Bontemps who stood aside in the nar-

row passage after having opened the mirrored panel, and entered her bedchamber. The room was warm, apparently Madelon had awakened during the night and found her gone. She silently blessed the faithful woman for realizing that she would appreciate a warm room upon her return.

She turned back to the hidden passage where Bontemps waited to be dismissed. "Thank you, Monsieur Bontemps," she smiled. "And a good day to you."

"Thank you, Madame," the old man smiled. "And to you, also."

He turned to leave and she opened the panel again. "Monsieur Bontemps?" she said.

"Madame?"

She paused, "Take good care of him, Monsieur."

The valet bowed again in the narrow confines of the passage. "I promise, Madame."

Smiling, Athenais snapped the panel shut and walked thoughtfully to her bed. She draped her cloak over a chair and climbed into the big bed leaving the hangings open for warmth. In less than an hour, she reflected, Louis would once again become the proud, imperturbable King of France and few would realize exactly how expert an actor he was in that role.

Chapter XV

Marie-Thérèse strolled in the garden behind Versailles. Happy, as she always was when her husband deigned to pay her any attention, she chattered in her broken French. "Oh!" her moan was exaggerated. "Pregnancies are such dreary affairs!" In a conscious gesture, she placed her hand over her swollen stomach. "Don't you agree, Madame?"

Athenais, on the opposite side of the King, threw her a glance of barely concealed exasperation. "No, actually I find them rather interesting." Her own figure was more noticeably distorted. She was due a full two months before the Queen.

"Well, Marie-Thérèse said with a pout, "I would imagine that you would find such a predicament rather embarrassing; after all, your husband has not been at Court for some time!" Her expression clearly conveyed the jealous malice within her.

"Madame," the King said simply.

With a haughty lift of her square Hapsburg jaw, Marie-Thérèse stopped. She had never learned, after twelve years of marriage, that the best way to her husband's heart or at least his continued good graces, was to preserve one's dignity in public. "I am retiring to my rooms!" she pouted.

"As you wish," Louis said with barely a raised eyebrow

With a hurt expression further marring her questionable looks, Marie-Thérèse turned on her heel and

started for the palace. Her beloved dwarf, Osman, was forced to let go of her train for fear of being whipped off his feet by the swishing of her heavy skirts.

Osman, grown more and more insolent in the lovingly permissive society of the Queen, had taken to carrying Her Majesty's train whenever she left her rooms. He had also taken to baiting the King whom he knew hated him. In his turn, the King had taken to administering a solid whack of his walking stick to the body of the insolent dwarf whenever Her Majesty wasn't looking.

Now, with the figure of the Queen retreating toward the palace, Osman took an opportunity to make a crude face at His Majesty. Fortunately for him the King, who had bent to pluck a flower from the border of the path, was without his stick. Unfortunately for him, Louise had handed the heavy ebony and gold stick to Athenais who had no more reason to like the little man than did the King. Seeing the dwarf cast a glance toward his royal owner, satisfying himself that she would not witness his insolence, Athenais prepared for a treat. The moment the dwarf screwed his face into a horrifying grimace at the King, she swung the stick and caught the dwarf squarely across the back. The courtiers, who enjoyed seeing anyone made a fool of, laughed heartily as the dwarf was knocked across the path and into a bush with the force of the blow. Yowling, Osman scrambled to his feet and hurried away after his protectoress.

"Touché, Madame," Louise said and bowing, he presented her with the flowers he'd plucked, a tulip.

Curtsying, Athenais accepted the flower. "Is something wrong?" she asked. "You looked a little sad just now."

"I was just thinking," he told her softly so the following courtiers could not hear, "if we go to war with Holland, I shan't be able to get more tulip bulbs."

Athenais nodded sympathetically. Tulips were

Louis's favorite flower. He'd imported, in the last year alone, more than four million of the bulbs from the Dutch Republic. "I thought it might be thoughts of the Princess."

"No, I've come to expect such tragedies." His daughter, Marie-Thérèse, named for her mother, had died a few months before, at the age of five. "I thank God the Dauphin seems to be strong enough."

Athenais said nothing, knowing that he did not really expect an answer. She brought the conversation back to Holland. "Do you expect the situation to come to war?"

"Yes. The Dutch Republic is getting entirely too self-important. In fact, I expect to be going to the front within a month."

"Oh," Athenais was disappointed. "Then you will not be here when our child is born."

"No, I will not be here, but then neither will you."

"I don't understand."

Louis smiled and squeezed her hand. "If I go to Holland, you may come along."

* * *

"What do you mean you are taking Athenais!" Marie-Thérèse stormed across the parquet floor of her antechamber. "You cannot take her, I will not have it!"

Louis regarded her with a calm indifference, "I do not recall asking your permission, Madame."

"If you are taking anyone, it should be me!" She tried desperately to maintain her self-righteous indignation but felt her dignity crumbling. "Why won't you take me?" she whined at last, her plump cheeks quivering and her vision blurred through the tears which were welling at their corners. Her husband's infidelities had always caused her agonizing distress.

"Madame, you have, in the past few months, become fond of taunting Athenais with the fact that your child is of royal birth. I wouldn't want you to risk that child on the journey to Holland."

"I only said that because . . ." she paused, mopping at her overflowing eyes.

"Because you cannot control your jealousy," he supplied. "Well, I am merely taking away a personage whom you find distasteful. I should think you would be glad to see her out of your sight."

"But she will be with you! And I know why!" The Queen pointed an accusing finger at him, "Because you want to be near her when she has that child! You care more for her children than you do for ours!"

Louis bit back his answer. It was true, he did care more for little Louis-Auguste than for Louis de France, as his son by the Queen was known. Athenais's child was bright, witty, and amusing while Marie-Thérèse's child was slow, infinitely less attractive, and so much in awe of his royal father that he could never be comfortable with him. Despite the fact that the Queen's child was nearly eight years older than his three year old son by Athenais, the younger boy seemed much older.

"Madame," he said at last, eager to end the conversation, "I did not come here for a debate but merely to inform you of the events to come. I shall leave by the end of the week and, if what I have just witnessed is your attitude, I shall trouble you no further before then."

Turning, he strode toward the door. Osman, the only person present in the room at the time of the King's arrival who had failed to leave, hopped quickly out of reach of the King's walking stick. Seeing him, Louis turned once more toward the snuffling Queen. "And Madame," he said sternly, "I wish you would refrain from letting that little monkey be so familiar with you.

Finding him sitting on your lap when I arrived was most distasteful to me."

* * *

"I am surprised," Madelon told Athenais, "that the King wants you to accompany him to the war."

Athenais sorted through her clothing, deciding what she should take. "What? Oh, yes, so am I. He is usually so bored with pregnant women."

"Who else is going?"

Athenais handed her a gown to be folded and packed. Madelon, who felt herself above such mundane occupations, passed it on to another maid. "Well, I am going, and Françoise Scarron is to join us at Saint-Germain with Louis-Auguste, and I suppose that Jeanne will complete my household." She smiled at the young girl packing the large trunks.

"Jeanne!" Madelon cried. "What about me?"

Athenais shrugged her shoulders and said seriously, "After all, Madelon. There will be a lot of work to be done and Jeanne seems willing to do it. I wouldn't want you to have to go back to such dreary work."

Realizing she was being mocked, Madelon tore the gown from the young maid's hands. "I'll do that!" she snarled. "Get out!"

The little dark-haired maid smiled. Madelon had become tyrannical since the elevation of Athenais to the position of *maîtresse en titre* and she enjoyed seeing someone get the better of her.

Athenais laughed as Madelon began packing the trunks with exhausting efficiency. Across the room Jeanne opened the door to leave and found the King just ready to enter the room. He tipped his hat to her and smiled at her blushing giggles.

"Good afternoon," he said to Athenais, kissing her

cheek. "Are you having a hard time deciding what to take?"

"Yes! Should I take many jewels?"

"No, I don't imagine there will be many state dinners to attend." He poked through the pile of clothing she had examined and rejected as not suitable for the journey. From the bottom of one pile he extracted a nightgown made completely of Venetian lace so delicate as to be nearly transparent. "Take this," he said, handing it to her.

"Oh certainly!" she said sarcastically. She draped the gown over herself and watched as it molded itself to her bulging figure. "I'll look just charming in this."

"Perhaps after the child is born," Louis reasoned.

"Somehow I find it difficult to imagine sweeping around in that nightgown in a tent during a battle," she laughed. Nevertheless she handed the gown to Madelon who put it into one of the trunks.

"A tent? What about a tent?" Madelon asked.

Athenais pushed a pile of gowns onto the floor and sat in their place on the sofa next to the King. "We will be staying in a tent, Madelon. Did you imagine that we could take Versailles with us?"

"No," Madelon admitted, "but . . ."

"Never mind," Athenais assured her, "you will be very comfortable."

"Madelon," Louis spoke up. "Will you go and see what is going on in the anteroom? I thought I heard a noise."

"Yes, Sire." Madelon smiled knowingly and left the room.

"What would you like to do, darling?" Athenais asked, a sly smile curving her lips. "Play some cards perhaps?"

"No, I would not like to play some cards!" Louis

replied decidedly. He drew her to him and began kissing her throat.

"No, no, no!" She laughed, pushing him away, "You know what the midwife said."

Louis remembered the old midwife's words, warning them. Citing Athenais's miscarriage as proof that they should exercise caution. "Yes," he admitted sulkily, "I remember."

* * *

Louis and Athenais, accompanied only by Madelon, set out from Versailles for Saint-Germain. There they would remain for a few days and then, accompanied by the King's newly formed household, they would leave for the war.

Françoise Scarron arrived at Saint-Germain good-naturedly carrying Louis-Auguste and making a fuss over Athenais. "My darling!" she cried, kissing Athenais soundly on the cheek. "You are looking marvelous!"

"Oh yes, wonderful!" Athenais muttered. She was in a poor mood and the widow's cheerfulness grated on her nerves.

"Your Majesty, you are looking well as usual," she told the King, sweeping her skirts wide in a curtsy.

Maliciously, Athenais noticed that Françoise, for all her much vaunted scorn for the luxuries of life, had spent some of the money sent by the King on a lovely sapphire choker. "Your necklace is wonderful, Françoise," she said. "I see you like the better things in life a bit more than you like to admit."

A look of annoyance and indignation crossed her face. "Really, Athenais," she retorted. "It's not such an expensive item, after all. I'm sure you have earrings

with larger stones than this."

Athenais refused to answer except with a frown. "I want to get to my rooms," she told the King who, used to her shifts in moods, called the *maître d'hôtel* to see to her things.

Her mood had improved somewhat by dinner and after they ate she, Louis, and Louis-Auguste sat in a small chamber and enjoyed merely being together. They had not had the opportunity of many such nights. Although many suspected to the point of knowing that she and the King had this child, Françoise's precautions for secrecy had been such that none could prove his existence.

Louis-Auguste was a beautiful child. Three years old, he spoke clearly and had a precocious wit which delighted both his mother and father. He was fully aware of the importance of his father's position for he had been carefully schooled by Françoise never to mention his father's identity in front of even the nurses and maids hired to assist Françoise in his upbringing.

He sat on the King's lap staring seriously into Louis's eyes which were exactly like his own in their grey-blue color. His hair, although certain to darken to the shade of his parents' brown curls, was now the golden wheat blonde of Athenais's dyed coiffure.

"He is a wonderful little boy," Louis said, smiling across the room at Athenais.

"Yes, he is," Athenais agreed.

"Yes, he is!" Louis-Auguste's babyish voice agreed emphatically. They laughed and he smiled superiorly.

Louis stood the child on the floor and watched as the tiny figure, clad in a long white nightshirt, toddled across the space separating him from Athenais. She picked him up and held him close.

A scratch sounded on the door. "Yes?" Athenais called.

The door opened and a rather tall, thin, nondescript young girl entered the room. Athenais recognized her as one of the nurses Françoise had hired.

"Excuse me," she said apologetically, curtsying awkwardly to Athenais and to the King. "Madame Scarron says it is time for the child to go to bed."

"Oh," Athenais was disappointed. She handed the little boy into the arms of the nurse. "Well, tell Madame Scarron that I thank her for bringing him here."

"Yes, Ma'am." The girl bobbed again in a semblance of a curtsy and backed toward the door—all too aware of Louis's presence. Athenais she'd met when she came to the house to visit the child but to be in the presence of the King was another matter. She hadn't realized, for Françoise had never spoken of Athenais to her, exactly how highly in favor the child's mother was. Indeed, to be sitting and chatting with the King!

"Mademoiselle," Louis addressed her.

She dipped again, starting. "Yes, Your Majesty?"

"Do you enjoy caring for Madame's child?"

"Oh, yes!" she replied truthfully. "He is a pleasure to care for."

Louis smiled at her and at Athenais as she rose and crossed the room to speak with Françoise who waited outside the door. Behind her she heard Louis address the young nurse once again in a more conspiratory tone.

"Tell me, Mademoiselle," he said. "Who do you think is the father of the child?"

"I don't know," the nurse replied, blushing.

"Have you no speculations upon the subject?"

"Well, yes . . ." the girl hesitated. "I think it must be someone important. Perhaps a Duc! Or even the President of the Parliament!" Her eyes widened, betraying her wonder at such possibilities.

"What's this about the President of the Parliament?" Athenais asked sternly, as though she hadn't heard the

entire conversation.

The girl jumped and hurried from the room. "Nothing, Madame," she stuttered.

In the hall Athenais could see the young nurse deposit the child into Françoise's waiting arms and hurry away down the hall. Shaking her head, she closed the door and turned to find Louis convulsed with laughter wiping his teary eyes on the lace-trimmed ruffle of his shirt sleeve.

* * *

The King rode at the head of the procession which included Athenais, Madelon, Françoise, and Louis-Auguste, the only members of the group not on horseback. Instead they rode in a rumbling, cumbersome coach drawn by six white horses in trappings of gold. All around them were the men of the King's "household."

Far from being the domestic establishment its name suggested, the King's household consisted of soldiers. It was composed of four companies of bodyguards. Each company was made up of three hundred noblemen; two hundred gendarmes of the guard; two hundred horsemen; five hundred specially selected musketeers (the requirements for their selection being gentility of birth and beauty of person); sixteen hundred constables; and the King's personal mercenary bodyguard, the Swiss soldiers, armed with halberds and resplendent in their blue uniforms liberally trimmed with gold braid. Lastly, and perhaps most important to the King, came Monsieur Pelisson, the historian he'd appointed to record the details of the campaign.

"So many men!" Madelon sighed, smiling out the coach window at one of the handsome Swiss horsemen, a company of whom completely surrounded the coach.

"I feel as though I am a prisoner of war!" Athenais muttered. Her foul mood was not improved by the bumping of the coach over the rutted roads.

"Athenais," Françoise reproached gently, "You should be glad that His Majesty has gone to such lengths to protect you."

"Spare me your sermons!" Athenais replied. She idly flipped open one of the voluminous picnic baskets which the King had placed in the coach. She looked at the food with little interest and replaced the top once again.

"How are you, Madame?" the King's voice came through the coach window.

"Oh, fine," she forced a smile. "Louis-Auguste is a little fussy. He is unused to being shut up in a coach for so long."

"Is that right, Monsieur?" the King asked his son who devoured the details of the soldiers' attire with his eyes."

"Yes, Sire," he answered solemnly. "Women are not much fun."

"I disagree!" said the King humorously. "Nevertheless, we shall see about another arrangement to break the monotony."

A few moments later the boy's boredom turned to glee when, at the behest of the King, the little boy was taken out of the coach and allowed to ride with one of the Swiss Guards.

"Shall he be safe?" Françoise worried.

"Françoise," Athenais told her impatiently, "Louis would hardly take chances with him."

"That's true, Madame," Louis assured her. He instructed his son briefly on the subject of riding and assured himself that the guardsman who held the three year old in front of him on the big horse would be careful. Then, bidding the ladies adieu, he returned to

the front of the long procession.

At last, in spite of the uncomfortable motion of the coach, even Athenais was charmed by the happy shouts of Louis-Auguste as he bounced along held in the arms of the handsome blonde guard. She ventured to lean from the carriage window and look ahead and behind them at the long line of men, all of whom were dressed magnificently. By the King's decree, they'd been issued special uniforms which, regardless of style and color, were literally covered with webbing of gold and silver embroidery. The column glittered in the sparkling summer sunshine which also glinted from the gold and silver of the coach in which she rode.

* * *

Daily, as the armies of France advanced toward the Rhine, reports reached the King that towns were surrendering. One hundred and twenty thousand men made up the French force with another twenty-five thousand nearby. Against that force William, the twenty-two year old Statholder of the Dutch Republic, led a force of twenty-thousand ill-disciplined, poorly trained men. By sheer manpower they were sorely outnumbered. The French, in addition to numbers, had in command the best generals Louis had in his service, the Prince de Condé, the Marshall de Turenne, and others. For the past two years, while the Dutch had been arguing among themselves, Louis had been preparing. Huge ammunition magazines had been established conveniently along the Rhine and the army moved onward with mechanical precision, each day nearing Amsterdam. The cities of Orsoi, Rheinberg, Burich, Wesel, and Emeric were put under seige simultaneously and all five surrendered in a matter of days. Governors of a town likely to be placed under seige sent the keys of their

cities before the French approached.

For Athenais they were exciting days. Louis entered the captured towns like a benevolent god surrounded by the glittering members of his household and treating the inhabitants who were used to the simplicity, not to say dullness, of the Dutch forces to a gorgeous, awe-inspiring spectacle. Gold flowed from his hands, like water from one of Versailles's fountains benefitting the merchants and farmers who supplied goods to the conquering armies. In the midst of the adoring crowds, who lined the streets to see the French household pass, was Athenais. Beautiful even in her advanced state of pregnancy, she was always, when entering one of the towns, carefully coiffed, made-up, and dressed in a gown which dazzled the townspeople even as her guards and coach dazzled them. She found herself presented with gifts from the governors of towns, grateful that the French King had graciously accepted their surrender, and flowers from children. She grew used to the stares of farmers to whom she was a magnificent sight and to the blushing, stuttering compliments of burghers. When at last it was clear that she must retire to some safer place to give birth, she left the King's procession with regret.

"It won't be for so long," Louis comforted her within the luxurious confines of her tent which stood next to his own. It was a beautiful example of the French industry he had worked so hard with Colbert to nourish. Made of blue satin it was furnished with carpets and cushions reminiscent of the Apartment of the Baths at Versailles. Divans provided sleeping areas for Athenais and Françoise who shared the tent with Louis-Auguste. Madelon had insisted upon, and received, a little tent of her own where she entertained the handsome Swiss guardsman she'd noticed from the coach window.

"No, I suppose not," she agreed reluctantly. "And I

will have Françoise for company." She pursed her lips. "I'm worried about leaving Madelon, though."

"Madelon will be fine," Louis assured her. "She is not a child. And she will watch over your possessions while you are gone."

Finally she allowed herself to be convinced and, with a large company of bodyguards, set out in the golden coach for the town of Tournai.

* * *

Her child, a boy, was born only a day after she arrived in the town. A lovely house, surrounded by her guards, had been secured for her use and a midwife was waiting upon her arrival.

"You were lucky you left when you did!" Françoise told her.

"Have you ever thought that the coach ride had anything to do with it?" Athenais snapped. "What do you know about having children!" Instantly she regretted her words. Françoise's late husband, the poet Scarron, had been a cripple and, as far as she knew, impotent. For all she could tell Françoise was, at thirty-seven, a virgin. "I'm sorry, Françoise," she said, seeing the hurt in her eyes. "I didn't mean to hurt you. I'm just on edge."

Françoise smiled her forgiveness and, as Louis-Auguste entered the room, held the little boy up to see his new baby brother.

"What will you name him?" Françoise asked.

"Louis-Cesar," Athenais answered. "It is a warrior's name!" She lay back against the pillows, a satisfied smile upon her face.

* * *

"Drive on!" Athenais shouted at the coachman.

"Athenais, you will kill yourself! You only had the baby two days ago!"

The great coach flew over the rutted roads, Athenais was anxious to rejoin the King. "Be quiet, Françoise!" she snapped. "If I kill myself it's no one's fault but my own!"

"Wheee!" Louis-Auguste shouted.

"There, you see?" Athenais demanded at the sullen Françoise.

In the corner of the carriage the baby began to cry and only the buxom wet nurse they'd hired in Tournai remained silent.

The coach jerked and then rocked as the golden wheels rolled over an obstruction in their path. The coachman hauled on the reins and pulled the horses to a halt.

"What now!?" Athenais shouted to a guardsman.

"We've run over someone," he replied. "A man, fallen in the road."

Françoise started from her seat, "Oh dear God!"

"Won't do you any good to get out," the guardsman spoke again. "There's nothing you can do for him."

"He's dead?"

"Yes, Ma'am," he nodded, "the people back there said he was the local drunk. Passed out in the road it appears."

"Then let's get this coach moving!" Athenais snapped.

"Athenais," Françoise was offended. "Doesn't it bother you that a man has just been killed?"

Athenais shot her an impatient look, "If you lie in the road you must expect to get run over. People get run over every day and it doesn't bother you and neither would this if you hadn't been here." Ignoring

Françoise's look of indignant hurt she pounded on the coach wall. "Drive on!"



When at last the encampment of the King's household came into view, Athenais was the only occupant of the carriage awake. They'd been driving for days, stopping only when the coachman assured her that the horses could go no further.

The encampment was dark. Only the sentries of the night watch stirred and everywhere the deep glow of dying campfires marred the pitch blackness between torches.

"What?" Françoise slurred sleepily, the sudden stopping of the vehicle disturbing her slumber.

"We are here," Athenais said shortly. Scanning the encampment she saw that Madelon's tent was dark as was her own. In the King's tent a dim light glowed through the silken walls.

"I am going to bed," Françoise muttered.

"Well, take the children and the nurse," Athenais ordered over her shoulder. "I'm going to see Louis."

Françoise touched her arm, "Why don't you wait until morning? He's probably involved in a meeting."

"I'll see him now!" Athenais snapped. "Why did I hurry to return if not to surprise the King?"

Stalking off, leaving Françoise to see to the children and wet nurse, Athenais walked toward the King's tent. The Swiss Guard on duty in front of the entrance snapped to attention as he recognized her.

"Madame," he said in his Swiss-accented French, "His Majesty is in bed."

"That's quite all right." Athenais barely looked at the man as she passed through the doorway.

The wide expanse of the tent was divided by a parti-

tion hung from the ceiling. In the anteroom, which Louis also used as a conference chamber, a low table held maps, charts, and reports. A candle stood burning on the table illuminating the room dimly. Athenais pushed aside the flap which covered the hole in the partition.

The dim light of the candle lit the room through the thin silk of the partition. A wide, low divan stood in the far corner of the room. Smiling, Athenais tiptoed across the carpet covered floor toward the bed. Reaching it she stopped, Louis was there sleeping, a tiny smile curving his lips. His arm, bare where the sleeve of his nightshirt had fallen back, was thrown out away from his body. It covered, in a gesture that was at once possessive and protective, the sleeping form of Madelon des Oeillets.

"No!" It was a agonized moan, escaping through clenched teeth but it was enough to awaken her maid.

"Athenais!" Madelon breathed, her eyes frightened. She had seen her mistress in a rage and she had no doubt that she would not escape unscathed. She jumped in a convulsive movement which knocked the King's arm aside and woke him.

"What is wrong?" he murmured, still half asleep.

"Nothing is wrong!" Athenais hissed. "Not for you at any rate!"

Louis came fully awake in an instant and saw only the retreating back of Athenais as she ran from the tent.

Athenais ran away from the camp leaving its torches and campfires behind. She ran into the darkness not knowing where she was going or what she might find. She vaguely remembered noticing upon her arrival that there was a meadow somewhere in this direction but in the pitch darkness of the night she couldn't be sure exactly where she was going. She was running through grass, tall enough that it brushed at her skirts and threatened to entangle her at every step. Behind she

heard another sound, another swishing in the undergrowth. Louis had sent someone after her to bring her back. She threw a glance over her shoulder and, in the darkness, tripped over a sapling fallen in the grass.

"Ohhh!" She felt herself falling, felt the pain of her tangled foot and the pain of the hard ground as she struck it with a heavy thud. Recovering herself, she heard the footsteps getting closer and tried to struggle to her feet. A strong hand gripped her arm. Looking up she saw, as the moon emerged from behind a black cloud, the features of the King above her. He was still in his nightshirt, having thrown on his dressing gown.

"Are you insane?" he demanded, dropping to the ground before her. "Don't you know that there are twenty-five thousand men in this encampment? There may be enemy soldiers in the area! Do you know what they would do to you if they caught you out here?"

Athenais raised her face to his. "Do you care what they would do?"

"What are you talking about? Of course, I care."

Athenais felt the tears slide down her cheeks but made no effort to stop them. "You care so much that you cannot wait for me to leave so that you can sleep with my maid!"

"Be reasonable," he insisted. "I am only a man."

"No! You are the King! The gift of God! The incarnation of Apollo! Is that not what you say? Is that not what you want your subjects to believe?"

His face was the picture of impassive dignity, void of emotion, the face of the King. "Have it your way if you insist upon being so intolerant. Is it permitted to ask about our child?"

"A boy," she said coldly. "I have named him Louis-Cesar, if it pleases Your Majesty."

"I will see that he and Louis-Auguste are legitimized when we return to Versailles. I shall see that they are

given titles. They shall be raised at Court."

Athenais had regained her composure and her tears had given way to a cold formality. "If that is a bribe . . ."

"It is not a bribe!" Louis cried, his voice unnaturally loud in the still night. "I will honor my children if I so choose."

Athenais swept a deep Court curtsy among the weeds. "Yes, Your Majesty."

"Stop it!" he shouted. "Stop it!" He grabbed her upper arms. His hands, which were usually scented and seemed so unused to hard work, were in reality amazingly strong from hunting and warfare. His long fingers pinched her flesh as he shook her.

She looked past his face at the sky. "I ask," she said in a frosty monotone, "Your Majesty's permission to return to Versailles."

Louis sighed, his hands dropping to his sides. "Do you really understand me so little? Can you not, you who have seen me in moments of despair, understand that Madelon means nothing to me?"

Athenais hesitated, the tone of his voice wounded her. She didn't want to hurt him and yet she did. She wanted to make him feel the betrayal she'd felt when she'd entered the bedroom of the tent. "How would you have felt," she asked softly, "if you had returned from some battle or seige and found me in bed with one of your Swiss guards?"

The King turned his face aside hiding the emotions which were playing across it. "Can you forgive me?" he asked at last.

"No," she said simply. "Not yet. You ask me to understand you. You must then also understand me. Until I can get the image of you and Madelon out of my mind I cannot be with you. I cannot love you and I cannot allow you to love me."

"How long?" he asked, the hope in his voice eating at her convictions.

"I don't know," she shook her head. "I have never imagined—call it vanity—but I have never seriously imagined that you would desire another woman. I stand before you with any pride I may have had left taken away. There were moments when I was jealous of a pretty young girl you would smile at, but I never thought . . ." she broke off wondering where to go with her speech.

Louis saved her the trouble. "Do you really want to return to Versailles?"

She merely nodded.

"All right, we'll go. I am tired of this campaign and Condé and Turenne are more than capable of commanding the armies." He waited for Athenais to say something. When she didn't, he continued, "Monsieur has also joined the campaign. He is doing well, he's a brave soldier."

Taking her hand gently, as though afraid she would pull away and run from him again, he started for the torchlight in the distance that marked the encampment.

"We will leave tomorrow."

Chapter XVI

Marie-Thérèse sat at a card table. She loved to gamble even if she invariably lost. On a taboret next to her sat Osman. The two were never seen apart much to the chargin of the King and the amusement of the Court.

It was nearly a year since his arrival and Osman had changed from a mischievous trickster, well versed in entertaining, to a strutting, vain, little tyrant. The Queen adored him and he knew it. She could refuse him nothing and, as a result, he asked for everything. Even now, instead of the brightly colored harlequin costumes worn by the rest of the Queen's dwarfs, Osman was attired in a suit of the latest cut made from the most beautiful and expensive materials available. His kingdom was the Queen's apartments and his power was absolute. None of the Queen's ladies, indeed none of the courtiers would dare contradict or disregard the little man and expect a cordial welcome from Marie-Thérèse.

There were only only two people who dared question the authority of Osman—the King and Athenais. The King, hated Osman with a passion. Whenever their paths chanced to cross he never failed to administered at least a harsh word and more often a kick or blow from his stick. Louis detested the way the Queen doted on the tiny man, allowing him liberties he thought most unbecoming to her royal station. It was far from unusual to find Marie-Thérèse with Osman perched upon her lap or feeding him from her own plate. She'd even had a tiny four poster set up in her bedchamber for him.

But if Osman was infuriating and hateful, he was also very much the fashion. The ladies of the Court had begun paying premium prices for Moorish dwarfs. When they could not be supplied, they had begun buying young African boys captured in raids. Dressed exquisitely in brightly colored silks and satins, the boys were trained as train bearers and were to be seen at every Court function following dutifully behind their owners. Few if any, however, enjoyed the freedom of Osman who thought it hilarious to stop suddenly and, gripping the Queen's train tightly, force her to halt with a jerk. Then, chuckling gleefully, he would bury his face in the folds of the train.

Marie-Thérèse, thrilled to have at last started a fashion at a Court so completely dominated by her husband and his mistress, bore it all with giggling patience. On the occasions when the King argued with her about the dwarf and vowed to have him sent away, she threw tantrums which mortified and angered him. He disliked scenes. To have his wife and mistress both so obviously angry with him that they sulked through chapel and refused to accompany him on the hunt or through the gardens embarrassed him deeply. At last he decided that the best course of action with the Queen was indifference. He seldom sought her company during the day and, as she was far advanced in her pregnancy, he did not feel duty bound to visit her at night. That left only Athenais to be dealt with but she was the more difficult of the two.

* * *

"Madame?" Madelon cautiously stuck her head into the bedchamber where Athenais sat idly on a sofa gazing into an open book which she held on her lap. "Madame?" she repeated softly. She had been treading

gently since their return from Holland, aware that, although Athenais had forgiven her the nights she'd spent with the King, she hadn't forgotten them.

"What is it?" Athenais asked, not looking up.

"Shall I bring your gown?"

"No, what for?"

The maid hesitated, "I just thought that you might want to go to the entertainments in His Majesty's apartment."

Tossing the book aside, Athenais rose. Her dressing gown of pearl-grey satin rustled over the Marble Courtyard, she could see courtiers hurrying to the entrance of the palace. As she opened the tall, double windows and leaned over the railing she could see the bright light and hear the music issuing from the King's apartment next door to her own. "No," she answered finally, "there's nothing for me there right now." She closed the windows and, with a wave of her hand, dismissed Madelon. Alone in her bedchamber she lay across the high, soft bed listening to the noise from the next apartment, wondering if Louis was enjoying himself. She wondered if he was being entertained by some blushing maid of honor. Probably not one of the Queen's ladies for, in her capacity as Intendant of the Queen's household, she had managed to see that all the Queen's ladies were older or less attractive than herself, and married. Not that being married would stop Louis. It certainly hadn't in her case, but he wouldn't risk the disapproval of the church for an old or unattractive woman. But there might be someone in Madame's household. She pushed the stubborn thoughts from her mind.

"Madelon?" she called. And when the woman peeked into the room once again, "Bring me the decanter of wine from the salon."

Dutifully Madelon appeared carrying a crystal decanter over half-full of a dark red liquid. "I've

forgotten a goblet," she said apologetically and left for the salon once again.

Athenais leaned against one of the carved posters of the bed examining a gilded cherub through the depths of the decanter. When Madelon again appeared, she poured a large amount of the wine into the goblet and bolted it down. After a few repetitions the cherub began to look red without the help of the decanter and Madelon gently removed it from her grasp. "I wonder what Louis is doing," she sighed at last. "Probably having a wonderful time." Her maid said nothing and she continued, "He had better not imagine that he can come back whenever he wishes." Her eyes strayed to the mirror panel across the room. "Madelon, I want you to call Guillaume and a few of the footmen."

Afraid to question her, Madelon left the room and returned in a short while with Athenais's coachman and four broadshouldered footmen. Ignoring their questioning looks, she directed them in moving one of the immense ebony-veneered cabinets from her antechamber into the bedchamber and positioning it in front of the mirror panel.

"Thank you," she said when they'd finished. "You may go."

If they noticed that her eyes were a little bleary and her words a little slurred, they knew enough to say nothing.

"Let him try to sneak in in the middle of the night now!" she said triumphantly. She refused to admit that the real reason for her actions was not that she was afraid he would try to come in, but instead how she would maintain her pride if he didn't. With the cabinet in front of the panel he couldn't come in if he tried and she could always pretend that he had.

"Perhaps you could ask him to grant you an au-

dience," Madelon suggested. "Or even just send him a note,"

Athenais's eyes narrowed suspiciously, "Why, so you can have a chance with him again?"

"No, Madame," Madeion said wearily. "But you've been miserable since we returned from Holland."

"You mind your own business!" Athenais shouted. "Get out of here!" She started up from the bed where she'd been reclining and moved threateningly in Madelon's direction. Madelon, not waiting to find out what was on her wine-soaked mind, bolted from the room slamming the gilded doors behind her. "And don't come back!" Athenais finished to the empty room. From below in the courtyard, she could hear the laughter of courtiers as the merrymaking in the King's apartment spilled out into the warm, late summer night. She picked up the decanter which was now nearly empty and, after a moment, replaced it on the table. The wine she'd drunk was making her feel depressed and ill and she had no appetite for any more. She threw herself onto a brocade upholstered sofa before the fireplace but even the sight of the cold, empty hearth made her feel sad.

"Damn!" she muttered at last when the sounds of a particularly loud group of revelers reached her. She jumped to her feet and, as the room whirled a little, held tightly to the back of the sofa. Stumbling slightly, she crossed the room and climbed into bed. Dejectedly, she pulled one of her big feather pillows over and wrapped her arms around it as she would have a person from whom she could get comfort.

With the flickering light of torches in the courtyard shining through the tall, many paned windows, she fell asleep.

* * *

Her eyes shaded by a wide-brimmed, plumed hat, Athenais sat hidden from the prying eyes of the Court in a secluded corner of the labyrinth. The high, square hedges made it impossible for anyone to see her through or over their foliage. As the King was engaged somewhere in the palace, it was unlikely that she would encounter him. She watched the fountain play; its statuary told the fable of the wolf and the crane. The crane shot water into a high arch from its beak while the wolf drank thirstily from a cascading pyramid fountain between them. The splashing of the water made the heat of the day seem less oppressive.

"Have you ever considered getting one of those little Moorish trainbearers?" Madelon asked lazily.

"Never!" Athenais insisted grimacing, "Have someone like Osman around at all hours? That miserable whoreson! I'd like to see him strangled." She leaned back fanning herself thoughtfully. "I don't care if it is the fashion."

Madelon shrugged, "I think he's . . ." Her words were cut off by Athenais's quick gesture. From behind them, in another alley of the labyrinth, came voices. Apparently other members of the Court had decided to take advantage of the cool shade of the labyrinth.

"Where do you think His Majesty's been taking himself to these days?" a masculine voice asked.

A low-pitched feminine voice replied, "Don't you know?" There was a teasing tone to the words.

"No," came the masculine voice again, "Now that he and Montespan are at odds, I'm mystified as to who is the current favorite."

"Oh!" the feminine tones were mocking. "Speaking of Montespan, my maid heard from one of her footmen that she was dead drunk night before last."

"No!"

"Yes! The night we were gambling at the King's. It

seems she even had her footmen rearranging her furniture. Now don't ask me why, it seems an odd occupation but that's what she was doing."

The male voice laughed and then greeted another set of footsteps the hidden Athenais heard approaching.

"Do join us," the male voice invited. "We were discussing Montespan and the King."

"Ah!" the newcomer cried knowingly. "Then you may be glad of my arrival."

"What is it?" the two original voices exclaimed in unison. On her side of the hedge Athenais leaned closer to the foliage.

"Nanon, my woman told me just this morning as I was dressing for chapel that she'd been talking to the steward of the household of Madame de Thianges and he told her that Thianges has been entertaining in the afternoons—royally entertaining!"

The two other voices murmured their astonishment and Athenais's long-nailed fingers curled, bruising the flesh of her palms.

The masculine voice spoke up, "Well, well! Exchanging one Mortemart for another, eh? I can't say that I blame him. With all due respect, ladies, Montespan and her sister Thianges are the two most beautiful women at Court."

Without listening to the grudging replies of the two anonymous ladies, Athenais rose and, avoiding the alley occupied by her unknowing informants, stalked off to her apartment.

* * *

"Gabrielle!" she stormed. "Now he is sleeping with Gabrielle!" She picked up an inlaid box from a table, intending to hurl it through the glass of the windows and into the busy courtyard below.

"Madame, no!" Madelon shouted and, grasping the upraised arm, wrested the exquisite box from her. Thwarted, Athenais turned on a crystal goblet and threw it against the marble of the fireplace. Behind her, as she dropped into a gilded armchair, Madelon tucked the inlaid box into a drawer of the ebony cabinet still placed against the mirror. When Athenais was in better control of her temper she would retrieve the box, which had been made to contain the giant sapphire from Africa, and replace it on the table.

"It must be his age," Athenais muttered. "After all he is . . ." she figured on her fingers. "No, he is only thirty-four, he's too young to be worried about his masculinity."

"It's you, Madame," Madelon told her, kneeling before her on the carpet. "He misses you and he has chosen Gabrielle because she is the closest person at Court to you in looks and temperament."

Athenais looked at her for a moment and smiled cynically. "Please, Madelon. Don't say such things to me. I used to say the same things to Louise de La Vallière. Now she is like a spirit that haunts the palace, gliding from room to room. She and the Queen have taken to comforting each other. I understand they have become fast friends."

"I don't think he's trying to replace you," Madelon said.

"No, I don't think so either," she agreed. Outside the salon in which they now sat, they heard a commotion in the corridor and the shouts of "The King!" heralding Louis's approach. "Apparently he and Gabrielle are through for the day. I want you to go to Gabrielle's apartment and bring her here. If she's not there, I want you to find her."

* * *

Gabrielle de Thianges stood in her sister's pink and silver salon, a sweet smile curving her rosy lips. "After all, Athenais," she was saying, "if you leave a valuable bauble like the King lying around, someone is bound to come along and pick him up."

The delicate flush which colored her sister's cheeks annoyed Athenais, reminding her that less than an hour before she had been lying in Louis's arms. "You didn't have to grab him like a starving dog after a bone!" she snapped.

"But I did!" Gabrielle insisted. "If I hadn't, be assured that someone else would have."

The two women eyed one another. Gabrielle was the elder by three years but they were so nearly alike in coloring and features that the years made no difference. Even their hair matched for Gabrielle, upon arriving at Court to find her sister's naturally dark locks changed to golden blonde, had enlisted the services of Monsieur Pierrepont to lighten her own.

"Ah, Athenais," Gabrielle sighed dreamily, "he is a wonderful lover!"

"Is that right?" her sister asked sarcastically.

Gabrielle laughed, "Don't be angry with me. But I sense that you remember all too well exactly what kind of lover he can be. You are missing him, aren't you?"

"I am not!" Athenais insisted indignantly.

"Don't lie to me, sister!" Gabrielle admonished. "It has been a long time. Your baby is nearly two months old and you yourself told me that the midwife had forbidden lovemaking for weeks before his birth."

Athenais turned away and, rising, walked to the window. "Yes, I miss him. But not only from my bed." She turned to her sister, "I miss the security he gave me. I miss the sense of safety and comfort." She shook her head. "Tell me what to do, Gabrielle."

"The first thing to do is to remove that cabinet from

your bedroom. Do not forbid him coming to you. You should know him better than that. For all that Louis is King, he is, beneath it all, a vulnerable man with delicate feelings and a fragile pride." She joined Athenais at the window and draped an arm about her shoulders. "If I were you I wouldn't wait for him to come to me. I would walk down that hidden passage of yours and beg his indulgence at his bedside in the night."

"I couldn't do that," Athenais said, shaking off her sister's arm. "What if he sent me away? I have feelings and pride, also!"

"One of you will have to sacrifice your pride," Gabrielle predicted. "And you are the stronger of the two, the more able to recover your self-esteem."

"Thank you, Gabrielle. I shall consider your advice."

Gabrielle kissed her cheek affectionately. "You do that. But I warn you, if he comes to my rooms again I won't turn him away."

Athenais nodded and watched as her sister left the apartment.

* * *

The burly footmen struggled as they carried the ebony cabinet to its original place in the antechamber. In its absence, the entire bedchamber seemed lighter, airier. The mirrored panel was again revealed and mutely reminded Athenais of the long weeks which had passed without her being reconciled with the King.

"Are you going to take Madame de Thianges's advice?" Madelon asked.

"Sneak into his bedroom in the middle of the night and throw myself on his mercy? I doubt it," Athenais replied, scrubbing her toe at the flattened carpet, crushed by the massive weight of the cabinet. "He'd probably

cry out and one of the Swiss Guards would charge in and run me through. Still, I would like this resolved before the Queen has her baby.”

“She has a week or two left.”

“Yes, well something will have to happen before then.”

* * *

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with me?” Gabrielle de Thianges asked.

“No,” Athenais replied, studying the effect of a ruby bracelet against her white skin. “Why in the world do you want to go to Fontrevault now, anyway?”

“A retreat to a convent never did anyone any harm, and particularly when one’s sister is the Abbess. I look forward to an entertaining time.” Gabrielle shrugged elegantly. “And why not now? There hasn’t been anything interesting at Court for days. The King is in a foul mood, no one dares to cross his path. The Queen is as engrossed as ever in that ridiculous Osman. What is left?”

“Is the King in a foul mood when he visits you?” Athenais couldn’t keep the antagonism from her voice.

“When he visits me? He hasn’t come to me for nearly a week!”

“A week!” Athenais sat forward in her chair. “Who has he been with?”

“He’s been hunting constantly from the time he leaves the chapel and his council meetings until he must return for dinner. Or else he walks in the gardens alone and woe to anyone who dares disturb him! Everyone says they’ve never seen him in so foul a humor.”

“Now I am truly confused.” She stood, crossed the room and thoughtfully leaned on a solid silver table. “I was about to confront him. I was going to appear at one

of his entertainments or on his way to chapel, perhaps even request an audience."

A pounding shook the outer doors of the apartment. Athenais and Gabrielle jumped and Madelon opened the door cautiously.

"We must see Madame de Montespan!" a deep masculine voice said.

With a glance over her shoulder, Madelon flung open the double doors and stepped aside as two of the King's Swiss Guards entered the room. Behind them, in the corridor, Athenais could see a group of curious courtiers jostling to see what was happening. She gestured for Madelon to close the doors.

"May I help you?" she inquired frostily, looking from one to the other. They were big men. She recognized them as two of the guards who had ridden near her coach on the way to Holland. Both towered threateningly over her and their blue uniforms trimmed with gold seemed to emphasize their authority.

"We have come with a message from the King," one of the guards informed her. He held out a document bearing the royal seal.

"Thank you." Athenais took the document and strolled nonchalantly to an armchair where she sat and broke open the seal. She hoped her outward calm would mask the apprehension which fluttered inside her. Momentarily the words scrawled in Louis's hand blurred but then, with an effort, she began to read:

"Madame,

This tantrum of your's has, in Our opinion, lasted quite long enough. You will attend Us at Trianon immediately upon receipt of this communication. Should you refuse to comply willingly, the bearers have been instructed to conduct you there by force. We trust,

however, that such measures will be unnecessary.

Louis''

Athenais smiled, the fluttering within her was gone. Trianon! Their palace, the palace he had built to celebrate their love. Had he been contemplating some action against her he would never have chosen a site so filled with happy memories and so private. His use of the royal "We" in the letter was, she had to admit to herself, endearing. He was hiding behind his royalty, placing it between his own fragile self-esteem and the possibility of rejection. One could certainly reject Louis de Bourbon but how could one refuse anything to Louis XIV, the Sun King of France? Wordlessly she handed the paper to Gabrielle who scanned it and handed it on to Madelon. A look of triumphant congratulation passed between the sisters for it was truly now that the power of France lay securely in the hands of the Mortemarts.

"So he's relented at last," Gabrielle smiled. "I must pay respect to your capabilities, sister."

Athenais rose from her chair and nodded regally, accepting the praise. "Now, shall I go peacefully or shall we treat the eavesdroppers outside the door to a show?"

"An epic!" Madame de Thianges laughed. "The *maîtresse en titre* being carried kicking and screaming to the King!"

The look exchanged by the guards didn't escape their notice and they burst into laughter once more. Everything was hilariously funny, everything was bright and beautiful. Athenais had gambled, playing for her position at Court, betting upon her hold over Louis, and had won.

"May I get a cloak?" she asked the guards mockingly. Receiving their consent, she disappeared into the

bedchamber where, under the quick and skillful hands of her sister and Madelon, she saw to her makeup, hair, and gown to be sure that she was at once beautifully attired and casual enough to seem as though she'd been brought to the King exactly the way she'd received his order.

She rode in a carriage toward Trianon. She'd decided against making the trip on the Canal because, now that she was actually on her way to the King, she wanted to arrive in the shortest possible time. Alone in the small vehicle she laughed, remembering the faces of the courtiers as she'd left the palace flanked by the two huge guards. If words occupied space she was sure Versailles would be spilling over with them by now.

Trianon was more beautiful than she remembered. It had been months since she'd seen it last and the gardens were a patchwork of color surrounding the glittering jewel of a palace. Leaving the carriage she entered the King's suite and saw him immediately. He was dressed in blue and gold, the colors of his household, and the embroidery on his coat was patterned after his ciphers and monograms. Athenais bit back a smile—another reminder that he was, after all, the King? She crossed the space separating them, her heels retorting sharply on the parquet of the floor. Still, although he could not help but be aware of her presence, he refused to turn around. Reaching him, Athenais knelt gracefully and bowed her head. She saw his feet turn as he at last faced her but she didn't look up.

"Madame?" his voice was the stiff monotone of the King. "I see you have at last come to face me."

Staring at his shoes, Athenais found the words a bit incongruous. "To face your shoes at any rate," she replied.

"You find the situation funny?" he asked.

"I did not expect to find His Majesty the King here at Trianon, Sire."

"And whom did you expect to find?"

"I expected to find Louis de Bourbon, the father of my children who is good and kind . . ." she paused and raised her face to him, "and forgives as well as expects to be forgiven."

Before her eyes his kingly demeanor cracked and was gone. He extended a hand and helped her to her feet. "Do I need to be forgiven?" he asked.

"Perhaps," she replied.

They left the building and walked to the gardens where an octagonal gazebo stood so hidden by climbing vines that it was unrecognizable. Inside, protected from the elements by a roof supported on the heads of eight dancing cherubs and the tangled greenery of the vines, they sat on Athenais's velvet cloak spread over the boards of the floor.

"I know about you and Gabrielle," she told him immediately.

"How do you feel about it?"

"I am not angry. She is, after all, my sister. My family believes in sharing."

Louis laughed. "Yes. Do you know what I heard said of you, Gabrielle, and your sister of Fontrevault? That you are one of the three most beautiful women in France and they are the other two." They smiled for a moment and he continued. "I have arranged for our children to be legitimized. They will be Louis-Auguste de Bourbon, Duc du Maine, and Louis-Cesar de Bourbon, Comte de Vexin."

"Oh, Louis!" Athenais threw her arms about his neck. "Thank you! An they can come to live at Court?"

The King nodded, "They will be raised in the royal nurseries."

"Oh—it's wonderful!"

"There is one problem and I hope you will understand."

"What is it?"

"Because you are married the act will not mention your name."

"That's absolutely necessary?" she asked, disappointed.

"Absolutely," he assured her. "It won't really matter. Everyone will know they are our children. It will merely be omitted on the legal document itself."

"All right, then," she conceded. "I understand."

"And you forgive me any annoyances I may have caused you?"

"Yes, I forgive you anything."

His face became once more the stern visage of the monarch. "Are you prepared to prove your words, Madame?"

"Perfectly prepared, Your Majesty," she replied. "Shall we go back into the building?"

"Why? Is there someone else around here?"

Athenais smiled and gestured toward the roof supports, "No one but the cherubs."

Louis returned her smile. He lay down on the soft velvet of her cloak. The sun filtering through the vines threw fluttering leaf patterns across his face as he reached toward her and drew her down next to him. "I don't think they'll mind."

* * *

Athenais and the King walked languidly along the gravel path between the basin of Apollo and the Latona fountain. They'd returned reluctantly from Trainon on the Canal and now moved slowly toward the palace. Curious courtiers stared at the King and his mistress,

apparently reconciled, strolling hand in hand and seemingly aware of no one but each other. They hurried off to spread the gossip. There were many who were certain that Athenais's days as *maîtress en titre* were finished, that no one could flout the King as she had and not suffer dire consequences. As the days had turned to weeks, more and more of the courtiers had subscribed to that opinion and now those who saw the couple in the gardens of Versailles couldn't wait to inform the rest.

For Athenais and Louis, however, there was no one in the gardens, no one else who heard the splashing of the fountains or the crunching of the gravel beneath wooden heels. It was a rude shock when a young, satin-clad page broke through to their bemused senses.

"Sire! Sire!" the boy's childish voice shattered the calm spell around them. He skidded to a halt in front of them and made a hasty and awkward bow.

"What is it?" Louis asked disinterestedly.

"The Queen . . ." he paused to catch his breath. "Her time has come."

"It's too soon for that," the King dismissed him. "She is probably mistaken."

"No, Your Majesty. She took a fright and fainted. The midwife says the child is being born!"

"Took a fright?" Athenais spoke up. "How?"

"Her dwarf, Osman . . ."

Without pausing another instant, Louis was off toward the palace. He strode purposefully up the path, not running but moving swiftly. Behind him, Athenais tossed the cloak she'd draped over her arm to the page, and followed him.

Inside the palace, Louis pushed aside startled courtiers and passed through their ranks without acknowledging their bows and curtsies. On his heels Athenais kept close and behind her came the little page.

"The King! The King!" someone shouted and ahead

the crowds parted to allow his easier progress. He bolted up the Queen's staircase which, like the galleries, was crowded with gossiping courtiers. Athenais was aware, as she passed unchallenged into the Queen's apartment, that her presence had caused as much of the buzzing conversation as the untimely labor of Marie-Thérèse.

The Queen's antechamber, a gorgeous creation in marble and parquet, its ceiling divided into sections each of which contained an exquisite painting, was crowded with members of her household speaking in low undertones. At the King's arrival they sank gracefully into curtsies from which they didn't rise until he'd passed on into his wife's bedchamber.

Athenais and Louis paused momentarily to allow their eyes to adjust. The drapes had been drawn and only a few candles illuminated the large chamber. It was silent, ominously so. Marie-Thérèse lay in her bed sniveling and wiping her quivering cheeks with a lace handkerchief. The midwife held a small bundle from which issued an occasional whimper and a few ladies of the household stood near the head of the bed. The Queen's Spanish confessor stood nearby and cast disapproving looks at Athenais as she entered the room.

While Athenais halted at the foot of the bed, the King walked to its head. "Madame?" he addressed the Queen, "I trust there are no complications?"

Marie-Thérèse stared at him, her adored husband, and fresh tears flooded her eyes and spilled down her cheeks.

Turning slowly, Louis scanned the room. Every eye was averted, none would meet his gaze. His eyes finally met those of Athenais and they exchanged a look of curious apprehension. He walked to the midwife and took the child.

"It's a girl, Sire," the woman said in an oddly consolatory tone.

Almost fearfully he turned back the corner of the lace coverlet which had been placed over the child's face. His eyes, usually so heavy-lidded and slumberous, opened wide and his complexion paled. He whirled toward the Queen who wailed anew. Athenais alone had dared to move in the room and she peeked over his shoulder at the tiny child in his arms. Her sharply indrawn breath made him turn his attention once more to her.

The child in his arms, so different from the pink and whiteness she was accustomed to seeing, was a golden brown, the color of the parquet flooring upon which they stood. Over the child, Athenais could feel the eyes of the King boring into her but she couldn't force herself to return his gaze. She couldn't raise her eyes, she was afraid of what she might read in the grey-blue eyes of the King.

"Osman frightened me," Marie-Thérèse stuttered between sobs. "He leapt out of the shadows."

"Never," the King replied, handing the child back to the midwife, "never let me hear that name again. You will see that that dwarf is out of the palace by tonight or I will see him tossed to the lions. I am disgusted, Madame, and shocked. Is this the way you were brought up at the Court of Spain?"

"He surprised me!" she insisted. "He surprised me and marked our child!" Her voice raised as Louis turned and strode away from the bed. As he reached the door he turned:

"And I, Madame, am the Shah of Persia." He reached for the door handle and paused, "The child is dead. Do you understand? The child has died. Arrangements will be made for it away from the Court."

"You are taking my child from me?" Marie-Thérèse wailed.

"What would you do with it, Madame?" he asked cynically. "Dress it in satin and let it carry your train?"

A collective gasp issued from the others in the room and, without another word Louis wrenched open the door and left the chamber.

The ladies in the antechamber dropped him a curtsy and rose, their faces expectant. Louis's face was impassive, betraying nothing. "The child is dead," he said simply. Murmurs of sympathy started but the news caused no great surprise. Marie-Thérèse had borne six children; of them one, her first, was alive. "Her Majesty will not require your services until tomorrow," he continued and waited until the women had cleared the room.

Repeating his announcement at the head of the Queen's staircase, Louis once again swept through the crowds, Athenais's wrist tight in his grasp.

They passed through Athenais's apartment and he locked himself and her in her bedchamber. They sat silently on the sofa before the tall windows, staring at, but not seeing the bustling traffic in the courtyards and on the roads beyond.

"What will you do with her?" Athenais asked softly.

Louis shrugged. "Have her taken to a convent. She can be raised as a foundling and enter the sisterhood."

She refrained from further questions knowing that his pride and all his sensibilities must be in turmoil. Instead she took a small satin pillow and placed it across her lap. She drew him unresisting from his sitting position until his head rested on the pillow, and stroked his hair and face until, childlike, he fell asleep. Mercifully her windows faced the east and so, as the sun began to set, there was no glare to disturb him, only the softly gathering dusk of evening.

Madelon entered the room quietly when the darkness was nearly complete and lit the tapers in a candelabrum on the dressing table behind them.

"Could I bring you anything?" she whispered.

"Shhh, no. Thank you."

"It's all right," Louis said, his eyes still closed. "I'm awake." He sat up, relieving somewhat the deadened feeling in Athenais's legs for he had slept nearly five hours and she had been loathe to move and disturb him.

"Would you like to go for a ride on the Canal?" he asked. "I think I'd like to dispense with the gambling and dancing for a night."

"Yes," Athenais agreed. "I'd like that. But I have to change my gown."

"I should change, also," he said. "Meet me on the terrace when you are ready."

"I will."

He started for the door and then, with a change of mind, crossed the room and opened the mirror panel.

"Don't be too long," he asked.

"No," she promised. "I'll hurry."

With a sad smile and a weak wave of his hand, the King disappeared into the passage and pulled the panel shut behind him.

* * *

Osman the dwarf was never seen again in the corridors of Versailles. His possessions were removed from the Queen's apartment and his name was never mentioned. The Gazette de France reported that the Queen had been delivered of a stillborn daughter and no one commented, at least not publicly, on the Moorish child who would grow up to take the veil at the Benedictine convent at Moret.

Chapter XVII

Athenais and the King sat on the floor of his Closet, his tiny private office. Reached through a door in his bed-chamber, Louis was the sole possessor of a key to the door and none entered without his express and rarely given permission. They sat cross-legged, facing one another on the plush Persian carpet. Scattered around them were the prizes of Louis's vast jewel collection. They had been removed from the two immense rosewood cabinets in which they were kept behind locked doors and fitted into adjustable shelves.

"I love it!" Athenais exclaimed watching the jewels sparkle in the flickering light of the candles which had been lit to supplement the light from the sole window in the room. She picked up a diamond and then, laying it aside, selected a ruby, then an emerald, a topaz, a sapphire, and so on. The jewels were of every size, shape, and color but in one respect they were identical. Each was, for its particular kind, a perfect specimen. Some were mounted, some were loose but each was a prize of immense value.

Athenais scooped up a pile of stones and held them glittering to the light. "I can't decide which kind I like best," she said thoughtfully. "Every time I come to a decision, I see a stone that makes me change my mind!"

Louis laughed. "I also find it difficult," he agreed. "Usually I choose a favorite and then, the next time I look at them I wonder why in the world I chose that stone over another."

"Which is your current favorite?" Athenais asked, holding an egg-sized emerald against her fingers as if it were a ring.

"Ah, I have a special favorite just now." He rose and returned to one of the cabinets, his stockinged feet silent against the pile of the rug. His coat and matching waistcoat lay draped over the back of a chair beneath which his shoes, their diamond bows winking in the light, lay on their sides. Here, in the privacy of his Closet, he was dressed only in his white lawn shirt, black velvet breeches, and white hose which made him seem at once less awe-inspiring and younger than usual. The deep collar of Venetian lace lay open at his throat spreading over his shoulders, and the full sleeves of his shirt ended in matching lace ruffles which fell over his hands. He resumed his place opposite Athenais who was attired in a Chinese robe of white satin embroidered with an all-over pattern of brightly colored exotic birds and foliage, fastened down the front with pearl clasps.

"You will like this," he predicted, opening a wooden casket of obvious age. With tantalizing slowness he drew from the depths of the casket a crown. Composed of eight tiers, the crown was breathtaking. Its setting was transparent and it seemed a network of immense diamonds held together by magic. In the candlelight it glittered with a savagery that seemed to possess life and, immediately, the other gems clustered around them seemed dull and insignificant.

"Louis . . ." Athenais breathed. "Where did you get that?"

"Through an intermediary agent working for some mysterious client. It cost me a fortune but, as you can see, it was worth it. It is the crown of Agrippina."

"Agrippina?"

"Yes, the daughter of a Roman general and the sister of the emperor Caligula. She was married three

times—the first time to a general like her father, after him a second husband she poisoned, and the third, her uncle, the emperor Claudius, she also poisoned. Her son was the emperor Nero who at last had her killed.”

“What a horrible story!” Athenais shuddered.

“History is not often attractive. However, historical relics often are.”

“I wish Madelon could see it,” she told him, her eyes glued to the glittering object. “She would go mad! Even Françoise would like . . .” she stopped. Françoise! She was supposed to visit me this afternoon. She turned the crown over in her hands, “I think the Romans had the right idea. When someone annoyed them they threw them to the lions.”

The King laughed, “Barbarian! How has Françoise annoyed you?”

“You know how,” she pouted.

“Because she has become the Marquise de Maintenon?”

“Which you helped her to do,” she accused.

Louis shrugged, “I rewarded her for taking care of our children. The fact that she used the money to buy an estate and title is not my fault.”

“But she is a Marquise also!”

“And I think that is the thorn in your side, my darling. She is of the same rank as you. I would have made you a Duchesse years ago only your husband refused the honor, as is his right.”

“My husband!” Athenais grimaced, “Another sack of lion feed!”

The King took the crown from her and pondered it and then looked at Athenais. “Are you going to pout now?” he asked in a teasing tone.

“Yes!” She stuck out her lower lip convincingly.

“Would you stop pouting if I let you take the crown back to your apartment?”

Athenais smiled mischevously, "I might!" She reached toward the fiery object but he held it out of her grasp.

"No, no, Madame," he cautioned. "Do you think I give such treasures for nothing? I expect my return!" He replaced the crown in its casket and turned the key in the lock. Rising on his knees, Louis plunged the tiny key deep into one of the cavernous pockets of his coat. Turning to Athenais once more he efficiently opened the pearl clasps which held her robe closed and, with an arm around her, lowered her to the soft plushness of the Persian carpet.

Athenais laughed, undoing the diamond buttons on his full, ruffled shirt. His skin was warm on hers and all around them the jewels of his collection sparkled in the candlelight.

* * *

The latch of the mirror panel clicked and the panel opened admitting Athenais to her bedchamber. In one hand she carried the rosewood casket containing the sixteen hundred year old crown of Agrippina. As she stepped into the room she was aware of a soft cry of surprise and looked up to find Françoise Scarron, now Madame de Maintenon, staring at her.

"Athenais!" she exclaimed. "Wherever did you come from?"

Recovering her composure Athenais answered, "From the King."

Françoise crossed the room and, before Athenais could close the panel, was peering down the dark length of the hidden passage.

"Oh!" Françoise blushed and stepped back into the room. For the first time she noticed Athenais's flushed

cheeks and bruised lips. Her hair was disheveled and the white Chinese robe was fastened at only a few of the clasps. "Oh my!" Françoise repeated, "I see."

Annoyed at the widow's shocked face, Athenais couldn't force herself to be polite. "Please sit down, Françoise," she said sarcastically. "I've just finished making love with the King and I'm tired! And," she continued, seeing Françoise's eyes widen, "I can tell you that floor of his is not the softest place in the world!"

Over Françoise's head she saw Madelon trying desperately to restrain her laughter. "Madelon," she said now. "Please get Françoise some refreshment, she looks a little faint."

Françoise had sunk into a chair and fanned herself delicately. Madelon, still shaking with mirth, handed her a tall glass of wine which the blushing woman accepted with an eagerness which added fuel to the fire of Athenais's irritation. She set the casket on the bed and smiled deceptively toward her visitor. "You must excuse me for a moment, Françoise my dear. I must freshen up a bit before I can entertain you." She laughed shortly and continued with a confidential air, "You know how it is." She disappeared into the bathchamber of her apartment, sorry only to miss the expression on the face of her visitor whom she knew most assuredly did not know "how it is."

When she returned to her bedchamber it was empty save for Madelon who was sprawled in a chair wiping her eyes.

"Athenais!" she cried the moment she saw her. "That was hilarious! Delicious!"

"Where did she go?" Athenais asked innocently.

Madelon dissolved into laughter once more and finally said, "As soon as you left the room she gulped down the rest of the wine and said she had to leave! She was getting a fearful attack of the vapors!"

Athenais smiled maliciously, "It serves her right for being so sanctimonious! She wanted so badly to live at Court—she can get accustomed to the fact that Versailles is not a convent full of saints." She dismissed the subject with a wave of her hand and picked up the rosewood casket. "I have something gorgeous to show you.

* * *

Versailles was in full splendor for the reception of a Princess. Everywhere there was silver and gold to be seen decorating furniture, foliage, and the nobility. The Court, which was normally the beautiful and elegant home of Louis XIV became, on these special occasions, the exquisitely resplendent setting of the Sun King.

The Princess for whom these festivities were arranged was the fifteen year old bride of James, Duke of York, brother of Charles II of England. She was traveling from her home in Italy and stopped at the Court of France on her way.

She was young, pretty, and charming and the pleasures of Versailles were paraded proudly before her eyes. There were banquets, ballets, and concerts. Gifts were exchanged and Mary of Modena, as the Princess was styled, was the queen of the Court, her every wish gratified. The fountains were played for her, Trianon was opened to her, hunts were arranged for her, and her smiles were sought after. On the surface all was perfect and if there were grumbles from the improverished courtiers who, at the King's order, were dressed from the skin out in new clothing, she was never made aware of them.

On her last night at Court, the Princess, the King, Athenais, and the witty and intelligent Marquis de Dangeau who was also the premier card player of the

Court, sat in an intimate group discussing royalty and its paraphernalia. The conversation narrowed to crowns and their varying styles and the Marquis de Dangeau, displaying his expertise in ancient matters, told the group that it was during the reign of Nero that the imperial crown first acquired its arched appearance.

"Really?" Louis asked interestedly, "I have a crown of that period in which you may be interested." He turned to Athenais, "My dear, would you be so good as to fetch the crown from your rooms?"

"Yes, of course." She rose and, curtsying to the King and the Italian Princess, left Louis's apartment for her own.

"Madelon!" she called as she entered her apartment, "Bring me the crown!"

From the bedchamber Madelon emerged carrying the ebony and gold case which Athenais had had made to replace the simple rosewood casket in which she'd received the relic. From the bodice of her gown Athenais pulled a long gold chain from which depended a number of tiny golden keys, each fitting a different lock secreted about the outside of the case. After a few attempts she opened the case. There, on a bed of black velvet, lay the crown of Agrippina.

"Get me the other casket," she told Madelon and, when it was brought, she deposited the crown inside its original container and returned to the King's apartment.

"Here it is," Louis smiled and, opening the casket, displayed the crown to the admiring company.

"How beautiful!" Mary of Modena sighed.

"Exquisite!" the Marquis de Dangeau exclaimed.

Louis smiled, proud of his treasure and the excitement it elicited. He held it in his hand and raised it toward a blazing chandelier above. Then, before their eyes, his face changed, its expression from one of satisfied pride to indignant surprise. "Madame!" his

voice was stern, "How has this happened?"

Athenais's heart pounded, "What, Sire?"

"This is not my crown! These stones are not genuine!"

"That can't be!" In her shock she took the crown from his hand with little regard for his publicly royal presence. Turning it over and over in her hands Athenais examined it minutely holding it to the light. It was true! Though the setting was the same, the magnificently matched diamonds had been replaced by paste. Her eyes, wide and horrified, met those of the King. "I can't imagine . . . I don't know . . ." Her head began to spin and those near her saw the color drain from her face as her hands, holding the crown, began to tremble.

Immediately Louis took the crown from her and called for a glass of brandy. "Drink this," he ordered, "and calm yourself. I know that this has happened through no fault of your own."

Her head began to clear and she was aware of the concerned eyes of the Italian Princess and the Marquis de Dangeau upon her.

"Tell me what has happened to the crown since you took it to your rooms," Louis asked gently.

"I took it there and showed it to Madelon," she began thoughtfully. "I was worried because it was so valuable and I didn't want anything to happen to it and so I had another case made for it, heavier and more secure than this rosewood casket. I engaged a jeweler from Paris to come and . . ." her hand went to her mouth, "he came and measured the crown for the case."

The King patted her hand, "I think we may have our answer."

"But I was there at all times; I watched him."

"Perhaps he gained access to your rooms while you

were out," the Marquis suggested.

"That would have been impossible, my servants are there . . ." she paused, "Unless one of them . . ."

Graciously Louis turned to the Italian Princess, "Please, Madame, when you reach England relate this incident to my cousin Charles for me as an example that nothing is so difficult to retain as a crown." He turned back to Athenais and raised her hand to his lips, "Don't worry, my dear, it's all right. But you should have given the crown back to me before this."

* * *

Athenais stormed up and down the length of her salon before her servants—the young maids who tended her, her footmen, and the steward of her household who were lined up.

"Can you imagine how I felt? Can you imagine my mortification?!" she shouted. "I want to know who helped in this crime and I am not going to dismiss anyone until I find out!" Stubbornly she sat on a sofa while the servants of her household stood uncomfortably under her angry gaze. Madelon, alone, of her entire household, escaped this inquisition.

At last one little maid began to sniffle under the hard eye of her mistress. "Oh, Madame!" she cried, "I didn't know!"

Athenais dismissed the rest of her household with a wave of her hand. Not waiting to be told twice, the room was empty save for the little maid and herself within moments.

"Well?" Athenais inquired coolly.

"Monsieur Dupre, the jeweler, was very kind to me while he was here measuring for the casket. And then one day while you were out he arrived and said he needed to see the crown again."

"And you allowed it?"

"I was the only one here! Madelon, the steward, Jeanne, and everyone else was gone!"

"Didn't you watch to see what he was doing?"

The maid looked away guiltily, "No, Madame. I assumed he was here on your orders."

Athenais sighed exasperatedly and was about to continue her questioning when the doors to her apartment swung open and Louis strode into the room.

"You should have come to bid the Princess goodbye," he told her with a kiss on the cheek. "What is wrong with her?" He nodded toward the sniveling maid.

"She let the jeweler have free access to my apartment. He must have taken the jewels from the crown."

"Ah yes, the crown. Monsieur La Reynie of the Paris police will be here at any moment. I have told him to use one of the smaller chambers to examine the crown and question anyone he feels necessary. Of course that doesn't apply to you, I have given him all the details we have. But your maid should be questioned." Louis went to the door. Calling to one of the guards, he instructed the man to conduct the maid to the room set aside for the questioning and keep watch on her there.

The maid, openly crying, was taken from the room but, before she went through the door, Athenais called to her. "Yvette," the maid turned toward her. "You realize that you will have to find another position elsewhere."

"Yes, Madame," the girl acknowledged sadly as the door closed behind her.

"Oh, Louis, I am so sorry about the crown," she exclaimed, on the edge of tears herself.

"It's all right," he insisted, "jewels can be replaced." Sitting on the sofa he drew her onto his lap and she rested her head on his shoulder.

"Did I embarrass you in front of the Princess?" she asked.

"No," he told her. "It will give her something to talk about in England. In fact, it proves that the French are naturally more honest than the English."

Athenais sat up curiously, "How so?"

Louis smiled and tugged a lock of her hair, "Monsieur Dupre took the stones but left us the setting; an Englishman would have taken it whole!"

* * *

As fatalistic as Louis could be about the destruction of his treasure, it continued to bother Athenais, keeping her awake in the night and causing her to check and recheck her valuables and safety precautions with an almost fanatic regularity.

"Darling," the King told her, "an isolated incident does not mean that your household is rife with dishonest persons awaiting the chance to steal from you."

"I know, but it happened once. I can't get it out of my mind."

"It may ease your mind to know that Monsieur Dupre was taken by the Paris police. Although the jewels were distributed and may have been cut by now, the man has confessed to the fraud and will, in all probability, be hung."

"I'm glad he confessed," Athenais said. "I felt guilty just knowing they disappeared while the crown was in my possession!"

"I think I have an idea which will make you feel better," the King said cryptically.

"What?"

Louis shook his head. "Meet me tomorrow afternoon in the Marble Courtyard."

The golden coach of the King, his cipher emblazoned on the doors, rumbled out of the courtyard of Versailles in the bright early autumn sunshine. Inside Athenais and the King rode contentedly on one seat while the floor of the coach was taken up with baskets of food.

"A picnic!" Athenais exclaimed. "It's a beautiful day for it!"

The coach came to the junction of three roads just outside the outer courtyard, the Place d'Armes. The road to the right would take them toward the Chateau de Sceaux, the country home of Colbert. Directly ahead was the road to Paris, and to the left was the main avenue to Monsieur's residence, Saint-Cloud. It was in this last direction that the coach turned.

"Are we going to Monsieur's?" Athenais asked, not disappointed, for she liked Monsieur, but surprised.

"You will see," was the King's reply.

They traveled only a short distance when the coach halted. They were outside the small hamlet of Clagny in the middle of a lovely section of forest.

Delighted, Athenais jumped out of the coach. "It is a picnic! What a lovely place for it!"

The trees were painted in their autumn colors of orange, yellow, and occasionally red. From where they stood a natural avenue ran into the depths of the forest, the tall trees spreading their branches into a canopy overhead.

Taking her by the hand, Louis led Athenais down the grass carpeted avenue under the ceiling of foliage. They emerged into the full sunshine once more in a kind of meadow where the forest formed a circle enclosing them within the rest of the world without.

Waiting while two footmen spread a velvet throw over the ground and deposited two large hampers of food, Athenais pointed toward the forest. "Louis, look," she said softly.

On the edge of the woods, standing in a stray patch of sunshine, was a magnificent stag still as the statuary in the gardens of Versailles. It gazed at them serenely, assured of its own right to be present and then, noting the movement of the footmen, bounded off into the dark forest.

"Wasn't he wonderful?" she asked, straining her eyes to see it. "This is a marvelous spot."

The footmen gone, Louis began to unpack the hampers. There was wine along with decanters of water, bread, cold roasted pheasant, partridge, and chicken, as well as pastry, fruit, and Louis's favorite, hard boiled eggs.

"We'll never eat all this food!" Athenais exclaimed.

"I intend to do my best!" the King laughed good-naturedly.

Their leisurely meal was punctuated with sightings of wildlife, both animal and fowl. From the branches above and all around the musical calls of the birds sounded loudly in the stillness of the forest.

"I love it here," Athenais said seriously. "It's beautiful and peaceful."

"I'm glad you like it," Louis told her with a gaze that held her eyes to his.

"You are being so mysterious! Tell me what your secret is."

"Very well." He wiped his hands on a linen napkin and, dipping them in a bowl of scented water, wiped them again. "I've decided to build a palace here."

"Here!" She was surprised. "It's a wonderful place for one but it's so near Versailles."

"Yes," he conceded the point. "But still, as you say, it's a wonderful place for a palace." From one of the hampers he drew a leather case and from the case he drew two architect's designs. "These are the two designs I'm considering. Which do you like better?"

Athenais studied them. "I don't like this one," she said, pointing to the smaller of the two which was in the medieval style, full of turrets and gables. The other was simple. The main part of the palace was shaped in a U around a courtyard and then had a sweeping wing to the right and left of the respective ends of the U. An ornate fence closed the open end of the courtyard and had, in its center, a high, wide, double gate. "I like this one much better." She compared them again, frowning at the turreted design. "This looks like something an opera singer or dancer might have."

"Then you like this one?" Louis took the design with the courtyard from her and studied it.

"Yes," Athenais told him truthfully.

"You have excellent taste," he smiled. "This one was designed by Mansart who had done a great deal of work at Versailles."

"It's a charming palace," she said examining the drawing once again. "What shall you call it?"

"Clagny," he replied. "Since that is the name of the nearest hamlet."

Athenais nodded and watched a rabbit scurry across the edge of the meadow. "It's a lovely name and it will be an exquisite palace."

"I'm glad you like it," the King repeated. "I wouldn't want it said that Madame de Montespan dislikes her own palace."

Athenais stared at him for a moment uncomprehendingly. Her own palace? "Louis, do you mean to say . . . ? That palace is for me? The one in the plans?" The King nodded delightedly. "Here?" she went on. "You are going to build it for me here?" He nodded again and, with an uncourtly scream of delight, she threw herself at him knocking him into the grass. "Oh, Louis! Thank you, thank you!"

"Madame! Madame!" Louis laughed as she covered his

face with kisses. "Remember yourself!"

Scrambling to her feet Athenais ran to the center of the clearing already picturing the palace which, on that very spot, she would one day inhabit. "It's mine!" she repeated over and over to herself, "It's mine!"

The King came up behind her and wrapped his arms about her, pressing a kiss onto her shoulder. "Are you pleased?" he asked with the insecurity in his voice which endeared him to her.

"Oh, Louis," she sighed, leaning her head back against his chest, "I am so much more than pleased."

Chapter XVIII

"Madelon!" Athenais called. "Would you light some more candles in here?"

The maid entered the room carrying a multi-branched candleabrum and placed it on the mantle. It did little more to brighten the gloomy salon than the others already present. Outside Athenais's windows a storm howled over and around Versailles. Although it was midmorning, the palace blazed with candles and torches.

Athenais and Gabrielle de Thianges sat in the salon discussing the new benefits Louis had seen fit to bestow on them.

"The percentage on meat alone will make my fortune!" Gabrielle laughed. "But to receive the entire proceeds of the Paris tobacco tax! I shall be able to buy Versailles as a summer home!"

"I wouldn't go that far," Athenais returned, "although you could make out very well renting out the apartments. The courtiers here owe me enough! Do you know how many of them had to come to me for loans when the King decided that everyone needed new clothes for the reception of Mary of Modena?"

"Really?" Gabrielle leaned forward smelling gossip, "Anyone really important?"

"No, unfortunately, not this time."

"Ah well," she was disappointed. As she opened her mouth to continue, a bolt of lightning struck very near and the thunder which followed shook the palace to its very foundations. "I can see why the King canceled the hunt!"

"Yes, you know it's horrible outside when Louis stays inside."

"Where is he, by the way? You know I only came to see you this morning hoping he would be here."

"I have no doubt you did!" Athenais laughed. "But he has gone to visit the children. I'm glad they please him."

"Is Françoise Scarron . . . pardon me, Madame de Maintenon still their governess?"

"No. Her conscience," Athenais rolled her eyes, "will not allow her to be a party to such an arrangement." Her mouth twisted cynically, "Her conscience didn't trouble her so badly when she needed the money!"

"Where does she spend her time?"

"Oh, she still spends most of her time with the children, telling Madame de Louvois how to take care of them. I assume it's a sin to be an employee but not to be a foreman."

"She's probably with them right now," Gabrielle pointed out significantly.

"Yes, probably," Athenais shrugged.

"She spends a great deal of time with the King, doesn't she?"

"What are you driving at?"

"Only that she is showing the King that she is most concerned with his children, who are also of great interest to him."

"And you think she may be using the children?"

"What do you think?"

Athenais paused. "I think I'd like to visit the nurseries!" She stood up, "Madelon! Bring me a cloak!"

"It's not that chilly," Gabrielle pointed out.

"It's the damp."

"And your pregnancy."

Athenais nodded resignedly, "Yes, I suppose it is."

"When are you due?"

Athenais stood still as Madelon draped a cloak of pale blue taffeta around her shoulders. "About a month."

The nurseries of the royal children lay in the south wing of the palace, the wing reserved for the Prince of the Blood. Athenais and her sister swept down the corridors and through great lofty rooms which lay between her apartment and those of her children. Passing the apartment of the Queen, they saw Marie-Thérèse walking arm-in-arm with Louise de La Vallière.

"My! There's a picture I never thought I'd see!" Gabrielle whispered.

"I think they comfort each other. At any rate, now that Louise wants to become a nun the Queen is more friendly to her."

"Why won't she leave the Court?"

Athenais shrugged. "She would leave it, at least that's what she says, but Louis won't let her. He can't bear for it to seem that anyone would actually want to leave this gilded madhouse." She curtsied as the Queen turned toward them. "Personally, I think she still hopes he will take her back."

Gabrielle examined the former favorite. She was thin to the point of appearing skeletal and her great blue eyes seemed too large for the size of her pale, bony face. "Do you think he would?"

Athenais smiled as they passed the incongruous couple. "No, he might have at one time but you know how he feels about sickness. As much as he loved his mother he fainted everytime he entered her sickroom just before the end."

They continued their discussion as they entered the Princes' wing. Through the noise of the corridor they heard a young voice calling, "Belle-Madame! Belle-

Madame!" In the crowd they saw the figure of the Dauphin, Louis's son by his wife.

"Monseigneur." Athenais and Gabrielle curtsied. Athenais was amused that the Dauphin called her by the same name as her own Louis-Auguste. "What can I do for you?"

"I have escaped!" he said proudly. He was, at eleven, the child of his mother, a true Hapsburg. There was little in him of the French and Italian heritage of his father and much of the Austrian roots of the Spanish line. He was tall, nearly as tall as she, and his hair was the same white blonde of Marie-Thérèse. In addition, he possessed none of his father's lithe grace and was a plump, sedentary, and perpetually awe-stricken child. Looking at him it was easy to imagine how the King could prefer his illegitimate children, who were trained from birth to please and amuse him, to this boy who was frightened of his father. He was uncomfortable in his father's presence and terrified at the thought of someday being called upon to succeed such a man.

"Escaped from what?" Gabrielle asked.

"From Bossuet and Montausier," he whispered as though the names could conjure the men.

"Ah, I see." Athenais knew that Bossuet, whom Louis had appointed as the boy's tutor and the Duc de Montausier, his governor, were strict to the point of cruelty. They were of the opinion that, rather than the loving and tender methods employed to teach her own children, the best way to teach the Dauphin was through discipline. He was not good at his lessons and was beaten for it by both men every day. It was not known exactly how cruelly he was beaten, for the King refused to discuss it, but it was known that on one occasion his arm had been broken.

"They will be angry with you," Gabrielle predicted sympathetically.

"Yes, I know," he said, trying to keep his chin from quivering. "Can I not go with you?"

"I am sorry, Monsiegnur, but I am going to the nurseries myself."

His face fell, then brightened, "Perhaps if you return with me they will not be so angry."

"I am going to see your Papa."

"Is he visiting the nurseries?" The Dauphin's face wore the same expression she'd seen so often on his mother's.

"I believe so."

"He is visiting your little boys."

Over his blonde head Athenais and Gabrielle exchanged glances. That a legitimate royal child, heir to the throne, should envy his illegitimate half-brothers seemed a sad state of affairs.

"Yes, Monseigneur, I believe he is." She took his hand in her's and patted it reassuringly.

"His Majesty loves your little boys," the young prince said matter of factly, "I wish he . . ." he stopped, blushing. "Here we are."

They entered the royal nurseries. Everywhere were toys and pets; a puppy slept under a bed and a stuffed lion lay in the middle of the floor. To one side of the room Louis sat near a window with Françoise, deep in conversation. And, across the room, Louis-Auguste, drilled a perfectly outfitted regiment of silver soldiers while Madame de Louvois held Louis-Cesar, who had just celebrated his first birthday. At the sight of his father, the Dauphin stiffened.

"Good morning." Louis rose from his chair and walked toward them. He kissed Athenais on the cheek and Gabrielle's hand. His eyebrow raised at the sight of Dauphin. "Where are your tutors, Monsieur?" he asked. "I was not aware that you had a holiday."

The boy began to fidget. "No, Sire, I . . ." he blush-

and studied the floor.

"You have much to learn and you will not learn it by running from responsibility," the King said severely.

Athenais, still holding the boy's hand, glanced at him sadly and then at the King. "It's my fault, Louis," she said with a bright smile. "He'd just stepped out for a moment and was going back when I stopped him in the corridor."

Louis fixed her with a searching gaze under which the Dauphin would have withered completely. She returned his look coolly. "Indeed, Madame?"

She smiled, "Indeed. I asked him to join us. After all, might he not learn the business of kingship best by having the finest example nearby?"

In spite of himself the King lost his severe expression. "All right, come in."

"Thank you," the Dauphin whispered as his father turned to return to the window.

"You are welcome," she replied.

Chairs were brought and Athenais, Gabrielle, and the Dauphin joined the King near the window. Françoise suddenly decided she had to leave and bade them a hasty farewell.

"Was it something I said?" Athenais asked sarcastically.

Gabrielle, holding Louis-Cesar on her lap, laughed. "Perhaps it is me she objects to."

"Belle-Madame!" Louis-Auguste ran across the floor, the lace-trimmed skirts he would wear for another year fluttering, and his golden curls bouncing. In his plump hands he carried two of the soldiers with which he had been amusing himself. He threw himself at Athenais and, bending, she hugged him tightly. "Pick me up!" he ordered.

"Darling, you are too heavy for me!" she laughed, pulling at him as though he were made of lead.

"You pick me up!" he turned to the Dauphin.

"Louis-Auguste!" Athenais corrected, "That is no way to address His Royal Highness."

"It's all right," the Dauphin insisted. He lifted the small boy onto his lap and listened closely as the lisping voice described his regiment of silver soldiers and the battles they had won.

"Do you know any battles?" the little Duc asked.

"Yes, I study battles," the Dauphin told him.

"Will you come and show me some?"

Glancing at his father for permission, the Dauphin dutifully followed his young half-brother across the room to the rosewood chest wherein lay the miniature army.

Athenais watched as he divided the soldiers into opposing forces and arranged them on a battlefield of parquet flooring. She turned to the King. "He is a nice young man," she said hopefully, but the King wasn't watching his son and heir. He was engrossed in the antics of the year old Louis-Cesar whom he had taken from Gabrielle de Thianges.

* * *

The storm still pounded the palace when Louis left his council meeting and came to Athenais's apartment.

"What were you and Françoise discussing when I arrived at the nursery this morning?"

"Nothing in particular," he answered, but his tone told her more.

"She was discussing us, wasn't she? I hate her."

"Athenais . . ."

"No!" She shook off the arm he had placed around her shoulders. "I do hate her! I hate her sanctity and her nose so far in the air and her bourgeois morality! What can she be teaching my own children? I can imagine!

She will teach them to revere their father and pity their mother who led him astray! How will she put it? That I was a concubine? Paramour? Heaven forbid she should soil her tongue on anything else!"

Louis sighed and, setting aside the goblet of wine he held, came to her. He took her face in his hands. "Calm yourself, darling. This is not you speaking. This is your pregnancy and the storm making you uneasy. Françoise is a fanatic. She sees herself as a missionary with a mandate to reform the evils of the world."

Athenais took his wrists and pulled his hands from her face. "But does she have to start with us? If it weren't for me she'd be starving in Paris still or miserable in Portugal—she almost went to Portugal you know. She could be preaching at that mad Portuguese King while he slobbers his dinner down his waistcoat!" She walked to the window and stared out at the rain, her breath coming in short angry starts.

"She is sensible of the debt she owes you."

"And how will she discharge that debt? By saving my beleaguered soul? By chipping away at your conscience until she tears us apart?" She leaned her forehead against the rain-cooled glass and felt tears begin to course down her cheeks like the rain on the panes of the window.

Louis stepping up behind her and, putting his arms around her waist, held her to him. "She can never make me stop loving you."

Athenais gripped his hands tightly in her own as if she could hold herself securely inside the circle of his arms, but inside she felt as bleak as the soaking countryside she saw from her window.

* * *

The chateau of Chantilly lay twenty-five miles north

of Paris. The Court, in a long procession of carriages and horsemen, were going there as guests of its owner, the Prince de Condé.

"I don't think we should have accepted this invitation," Louis said aloud in the confines of his coach.

"Why?" Athenais was his only companion. The Queen and Louise had retired for a few days to the convent of Saint Marie de Chaillot and Françoise had insisted upon staying at Versailles with Louis-Auguste who had a slight cold.

"It will cause problems. I prefer to have my nobles as my guests rather than the other way around."

Athenais shrugged. The King had been in a foul mood all morning. It was one of the trials of being the favorite that Louis, who would rather die than lose control of his emotions in public, had no qualms about venting his moods in private. It was to be endured and ignored. They rumbled along in silence for several minutes.

"I feel that something is going to happen," he continued. "Something that will make me sorry I have come. Condé has been inviting me to Chantilly for five years."

"Why don't we return to Versailles, then?"

"No, Condé is recovering from a wound suffered in Flanders. I should accept his invitation in return for the service he has done me."

Athenais shrugged again. Louis's mood appeared to be contagious.

* * *

The gardens of Chantilly, planned and executed by Le Nôtre, were beautifully fashioned and in colorful blossom as the Court, led by the King and Condé on either side of Athenais, walked slowly through them.

"Charming," Louis complimented his host. "Beautiful."

The Prince de Condé, an illustrious soldier for nearly all of his fifty-two years, glanced warily at his guest. Years before, another noble had royally entertained the King. The wealth and magnificence displayed for him had so threatened Louis that shortly after his visit the unfortunate host was arrested and much of his treasure now decorated the halls and salons of Versailles. The arrested man, Nicholas Fouquet, had spent the twelve years since that visit languishing in the prison of Pignerol. But Louis had gained immeasurably in confidence since that time and Condé saw that he need not worry. "I thank you, Sire," he replied.

Dinner was served among the scented splendor of the gardens. Louis was at the main table with Athenais and Condé on either side. As she ate and conversed, Athenais became aware of a rather agitated man frantically signaling to the Prince.

"My lord," she said, leaning across the King, "I believe that gentleman is trying to get your attention."

Condé peered in the indicated direction. "That is my maître d'hôtel, Vatel. Apparently there is some problem." Excusing himself, the Prince left the table and joined Vatel who immediately led him behind a thick section of bushes.

"Vatel," Louis murmured. "Why does that name sound familiar?"

Athenais shrugged, "I have never heard of him."

"I have, but where?"

In a few moments Condé rejoined them. "I'm sorry, Sire," he said, resuming his chair, "It seems that some unexpected guests have arrived and Monsieur Vatel is upset because the meat will be missing at their tables."

"If the guests were unexpected, it follows that they

were also uninvited," Louis observed. "Tell Vatel that he needn't worry about such people." He paused, chewing thoughtfully, "By the way, where did you get Monsieur Vatel? His name sounds familiar."

The Prince paused momentarily. "I hired him," he said slowly, "from the Marquis de Belle-Isle."

"Oh," Louis did not pursue the subject.

On the other side of the King, Athenais smiled. The Prince's use of the title was delicate. The Marquis de Belle-Isle was none other than the unfortunate Nicholas Fouquet.

* * *

Evening had fallen over Chantilly and the courtyard was alive with horses, riders, and hounds. The kennel boys held the dogs with difficulty as others of the Prince's staff sported bright lanterns. The Court was going stag hunting by moonlight.

Athenais, feeling uncomfortable and awkward on horseback, assured the King she would be fine left behind at the chateau and she watched as the party pounded out of view into the forests. She stared after them until only the baying of the hounds and the occasional glare of a lantern was visible, and then she returned to the gardens. Finding a particularly lovely bower, she dropped to the lawn and lost herself in contemplation.

"May I join you, Madame?" A masculine voice jolted her from her thoughts. The Prince de Condé stood before her.

"Of course, Your Highness," she smiled. "I thought you had gone with the hunt."

"No," he paused, grunting as he lowered himself to the ground, leaning heavily upon his cane. "The surgeons tell me I must stay off a horse until my leg

heals if I'm to return to Flanders yet this summer."

"I see," she studied the man before her. He was not a handsome man—his face was thin, his chin receding, and he had a large nose that emerged almost horizontally from his face and then turned downward, but there was about him a grandeur and pride which had earned him the sobriquet "the Grande Condé." "I hope you are much better soon."

"Thank you. I feel I must thank you also for your support of the war. I know you have had a great deal to do with the money appropriated for the campaigns."

Athenais dismissed his praise with a gesture. "You do me too much honor," she insisted. "The King favors your campaigns. I but share his convictions."

"I see," he paused. "You accompanied His Majesty on the campaign last year, did you not?" Athenais confirmed this and he continued. "That was brave of you. Most women would shrink from such conditions."

"I am glad now that I stayed behind while the rest went on the hunt," she smiled. "I am most flattered."

"Is there another reason?" he asked suddenly.

"Another reason? I don't know what you mean."

Condé searched for the right words, "Forgive me if I pry, but you seem . . . a bit sad. All through dinner and now there are times when your face is in repose and you look so wistful."

Athenais looked away, unhappy that she was not in better control of herself. "It is my condition," she explained, "women sometimes get odd notions at such times."

"Yes," the Prince agreed. "I remember that such was the case when my grandson was born."

She looked at the Prince and read his thoughts. An alliance with the blood royal, even though it might not be legitimate, was desirable to any high-ranking family. Most of the highest nobility of France could boast some

ancestor who was the child of a king. Henri IV, Louis's own grandfather, was an ancestor of many families through the children of his *maîtresse en titre*, Gabrielle d'Estrees. The Prince de Condé was the head of one of the most important families in France; it was something to think about.

* * *

Athanais lay in the wide fourposter of the room she'd been allotted by the steward of the Prince's household. The furnishings of the chateau, different from the delicately graceful furniture now in vogue, was in the massive style of years before. The Prince, with a soldier's disregard for fashion, had not bothered to keep pace with the quickly changing styles. The hangings, both on the bed and at the windows, were a chocolate brown which blended with the dark paneling of the walls, making it difficult to distinguish the features and contours around her in the darkness. She had not had Madelon draw the drapes and the moonlight streamed across the floor, but even its bright beams did little to illuminate the room.

Madelon, after helping her to undress and get into bed, had disappeared for a rendezvous with someone, a marquis or marshall, Athenais couldn't remember which. Through the thick door which joined the room to that of Louis, she could hear the muffled sounds of his *coucher*. The noblemen were assembled for the ceremony of putting the King to bed. Their discussions, what she could hear of them, centered around the evening's hunting. At last she heard the last of the courtiers troop out of the King's room and down the hall. Then, finally, it was quiet. Closing her eyes, Athenais drew deep, even breaths and willed herself to fall asleep. She was growing drowsy when she heard the click of a door

handle and the squeak of the hinges as the connecting door swung open.

"Athenais?" Louis stood in the open doorway, a candle in his hand. He was dressed in his cream lawn, lace-trimmed nightshirt with a red and gold brocade dressing gown over it.

"Yes?" she answered.

The door closed. He crossed the floor and, setting the candle on the table, extinguished it with a short breath. Removing his dressing gown, he drew back the coverlet and slipped into the bed beside her.

"Oh, Louis!" she sighed. "You know it is too near to my time. The baby is due any day." There was a trace of impatience in her tone.

"I know that," he replied. "But you have seemed so strange lately. I don't understand. You seem uneasy all the time and unsure of yourself. It bothers me to see you so because you are usually confident enough for ten women."

"Well, I just have a lot on my mind," she answered.

"I thought you might be awake yet and so I decided to come and keep you company tonight. We do not get so many chances at Versailles."

In the moonlight Athenais could make out his features and the concern she saw in his face made her regret the doubts she'd held about his feelings. "Thank you, Louis," she murmured and, snuggling close to him, she fell asleep.

* * *

It was just getting light over Chantilly when Athenais was awakened by a commotion in the hall outside her door. Footsteps hurried past and muffled voices spoke urgently.

"Louis . . ." she nudged him gently. "Louis."

He opened one eye. "What's wrong?"

"I think something's happening. It sounds like people rushing around in the corridor."

Sleepily, Louis rose from the bed and, straightening his nightshirt, drew on his dressing gown. Athenais pulled herself out of bed and reached for her robe. She was behind him as he opened the door. Down the hall came a lackey of the Prince, his face was worried and his manner urgent.

"What's happened?" Louis demanded.

Realizing it was the King, the man paused and bowed. "There's been an accident. The maître d'hôtel is wounded."

"Wounded?" Louis repeated.

"Yes, Sire. The Prince de Condé has been summoned."

"Take me to him," Louis said. With Athenais at his heels, he followed the man down the corridor and toward the quarters reserved for the maître d'hôtel.

Outside the man's room the Prince stood talking with his steward and some others Athenais didn't know.

"What has happened?" Louis called.

The men bowed and waited until he had reached them. From a distance, for she had fallen behind him in the corridors, Athenais saw the King glance into the room through the open door where the conversation was taking place. His face paled and he turned toward her. "Stay there, Athenais, you don't want to see this."

Considerately, the men moved to where she stood.

"It seems," the Prince was telling the King, "that Monsieur Vatel was most upset about the meat last night. He rose this morning to supervise the deliveries of the fish he was to serve this morning. When only one shipment arrived, he asked the delivery boy if that was all there was. The delivery boy, not knowing that Vatel

had ordered from more than one merchant, said yes, that was all. Vatel thought he was going to find himself even shorter on servings of the fish than on the meat last night and, not being able to bear the thought of the embarrassment, he came up to his room and . . .” he paused with a glance toward Athenais, “fell on his sword. Meanwhile, the other shipments of fish have arrived and so it seems our Monsieur Vatel has given his life for nothing.”

“I knew something like this would happen!” Louis declared. “Didn’t I tell you that on the way?” he asked Athenais. “From now on you are not to provide for the entire Court. It is too much to expect from your staff,” he said to the Prince de Condé.

Turning, he led Athenais back to their rooms. “I will be glad,” he insisted, “when I am back at Versailles!”

* * *

It was not many days after their return to Versailles that Athenais’s child was born. Louis, as he had upon the birth of Louis-Auguste, hurried to her side as soon as she was delivered. The midwife held the infant out to him and he sat near Athenais on the bed cradling their child in his arms. The child, their first daughter, was named Louise-Françoise de Bourbon and given the title, Mademoiselle de Nantes.

Chapter XIX

Athenais moved through the crowded salons of the Grand Apartment as though she were queen of Versailles and, in many respects, she was. At thirty-three years of age she had been the mistress of the French King for seven years. It was to her that the ambassadors, the place seekers, and the petitioners came. She was more beautiful, more glamorous than any of the pretty young girls being displayed by anxious parents hoping to catch the eye, and the favor, of Louis. And yet there was a dark cloud in the sky over her head. For all of her gaiety and seeming carelessness, she found it difficult to conjure the spirit of confidence which had once been hers. It didn't show when, standing next to Louis on the Ambassador's staircase, she acknowledged the praise and gifts of visiting envoys with a gracious nod of her bejeweled head, or when she, led by Louis, opened the balls and masques of the Court. But if one knew when and where to look they could catch it in her expression and see it in her eyes at the rare split seconds when she was truly off guard.

Françoise de Maintenon—the Court had, after a year, finally been able to stop calling her Scarron—was still at Court and still whispering predictions of hellfire and damnation into the King's ear, but even she had ceased to elicit the passionate response she once had from Athenais.

"Madame?" Madelon brought Athenais a cup of chocolate on a tray.

"Thank you," Athenais took the steaming cup from the tray. "You know, it will seem strange to be here at

Versailles while the King is off in Flanders. The Court will seem a town of women with so many of the men going."

"Yes," Madelon agreed, thinking of a certain young captain of the King's guards who would leave with Louis's household. "I think . . ."

"The King!" a lackey's announcement interrupted her. On his heels Louis entered the room.

"Good morning!" Athenais cried. "This is a pleasant surprise!"

Smiling, Louis crossed the room and kissed her, saluting Madelon's presence with a tip of his plumed hat. "I have had an idea and I thought I would ask you about it."

"Fine, sit down," she invited. "Would you like a cup of chocolate?"

The grimace on his face set both Athenais and Madelon into gales of laughter. The King loathed chocolate because of the Queen's passion for it and he hated any mention of it.

"Here, Madelon," Athenais giggled. "Take this cup away." She handed the half-drunk chocolate to the other woman, "Bring me a decanter of wine and one of water instead." As Madelon left the room she turned to Louis. "Now, what was your idea?"

"Well," he smiled mischievously. "I had one but now I am getting another." He reached an arm about her waist.

"No, no!" she cried, playfully slapping his hand. "First ideas first. Then, if the first idea is good enough, we'll talk about the second idea."

"All right," he agreed. "It's a bargain. My first idea was that instead of a promenade in the gardens or a hunt, we should take the Court on a picnic to Clagny."

"Oh, I should like that!" Athenais agreed. "I am anxious to see how the workmen are progressing."

Louis laughed, "You mean how they've progressed since two days ago? That was the first time you went there."

"I know," she admitted. "I go at least four times a week, but it is so beautiful."

"Then it is settled? We shall go to Clagny this afternoon?" Athenais nodded and he continued, wrapping his arm about her once again. "Now, about my second idea . . ."

* * *

Athenais's palace of Clagny, which had already been in the building for a year, rose out of the forest majestically.

Built around three sides of a courtyard, it rose two stories with a third story covered by the down-sloping mansard roof. The entrance, or courtyard side of the chateau faced east, the garden side faced west. The central section of the palace consisted of grand apartments fit to receive the highest ranking personages in the world. The rooms here were aligned so that, if one stood at one end of the central section with all the connecting doors open, one could have a clear view to the other end of the section.

The north section of the palace contained a series of offices on the courtyard side and a suite of reception salons which overlooked the gardens; the south section was a gallery on the garden side with another series of rooms overlooking the courtyard.

On the far-reaching ends of the north and south sections, wings, a single story in height, projected at right angles to the sections to which they were attached, pointing away from the courtyard.

Behind the palace were the gardens and Le Nôtre had promised that, in their way, they would be as beautiful

as those of Versailles and the Trianon de Porcelaine. He had preserved to great extent the natural beauty of the place. There was a great orangery with the trees growing in tubs which were carefully hidden by banks of tuberoses, carnations, and jasmines making them seem more permanent. Beyond this man-made grove there was a lake around which Le Nôtre had preserved a wide section of the forest making it seem that there could not possibly be such a civilized place as the palace at such close quarters.

* * *

The Court came at the invitation of the King and Athenais, rumbling down the road from Versailles in coaches and on horse back.

Accompanied by the King, Athenais led the Court on a tour of the as yet unfinished galleries and apartments of Clagny. Fifteen hundred workmen still swarmed over the palace and while the interior was being outfitted, the decoration of the raw exterior was being attended to. Only the gardens were finished and it was there that the picnickers retired leaving the workmen in peace.

In the forest, still in the pale green shades of early summer, the assemblage was served from great hampers brought from Versailles. As was usually the case when the courtiers were offered a free meal, the food was devoured quickly.

Afterward, while a few of the more adventuresome waded in the chilly shallows of the lake and others retired to explore the gardens and palace more fully, Athenais sat on a cushion placed on the ground, talking to the King. In the distance, at the edge of the forest, she saw Louise de La Vallière in conversation with the Queen.

"They seem like old friends," she commented, drawing Louis's attention to the sight.

"They have a great deal in common," he replied.

"No, I think they have only one thing in common." She looked meaningfully at the King. "Why won't you let her leave? It can't be that you don't want people to think she's left you because everyone knows she hasn't been your mistress for years. She's scarcely seems acquainted with you at times."

"It's not my doing. She asked me a year ago if she could leave. I told her to consult Bishop Bossuet about it and he said she should remain at Court another year."

"Why?"

Louis shrugged, "He said she was leaving out of jealousy and pique."

"Pique!" Athenias was incredulous. "Seven years is a long time for a fit of pique to last! I think Monsieur Bossuet, for all that he is a Bishop and supposed to be holy, enjoys manipulating the lives of others." She knew that Françoise de Maintenon had been reporting to Bossuet, discussing policy, and she suspected that the pious widow had something to do with it. "I think it's cruel," she continued, "to keep her here." She saw the skeptical amusement on the King's face and shook her head, "Don't smile, I mean it. Once I would have done anything to get Louise away from you. I even . . ." She stopped. She had been about to tell him about the meeting and prayers with La Voisin so long ago. "Anyway, now I see her and she is so miserable. It is tearing her apart. On the one hand she feels that she has committed crimes by being your mistress and bearing your children, and on the other she loves you and her children." She paused. "Let her go, Louis, let her leave."

"It's not in my hands," he replied. "It's in the hands

of Bossuet."

"You can be cruel," she told him. "I fear the day when you shall tire of me because I will never be able to rot in some abbey sustained by self-righteousness!"

Rising, she left him to walk toward the palace, and the courtiers she passed bowed and curtsied but, lost in her contemplations, she didn't see them.

* * *

Louise de La Vallière knelt on the hard marble floor of her room before the tiny altar which stood where her jewel cabinet had once been. The room, once hung in silks and velvets, its floors covered with luxurious carpets, was cold and sparsely furnished. She was living the life of a penitent within the golden walls of Versailles. The fourposter which had seen the love of Louise and the King was gone, in its place a thin pallet served as her bed on the floor. Beneath the somber silks and serges she wore at Court a hairshirt punished her once silken and pampered flesh. She had, as Bossuet directed, spent another year within the palace she regarded as her prison. Now she hoped, with the help of the Queen, she would at last be allowed to find her peace in a convent. Alone in her ill-heated room the fasting and chills took their toll on her frail body. When her lone remaining maid found her, she was unconscious and burning with fever.

"How is she?" Athenais asked when Louis arrived at her apartment. Many of the Court had gone to inquire as to the health of Louise. Marie-Thérèse and Françoise de Maintenon kept a vigil at her side, but Athenais confined her inquiries to the King feeling that her appearance in the rooms of the woman she had supplanted would be indelicate.

Louis tossed his hat onto a table and leaned his walk-

ing stick against the wall. "The doctors are with her, they are trying everything."

"Will she live?"

"I don't know."

But Louise did live. With a strength surprising in one so weakened, she rallied and the doctors soon announced that she would recover. She was again seen in the corridors of Versailles although she had long since stopped attending the entertainments. She visited her children even though the sight of them reminded her of her past weaknesses and failings. And she could occasionally be glimpsed, a solitary figure in black or brown, wandering the gardens, carefully avoiding the haunts of the Court.

* * *

Shortly before Louis was to leave for the front, Athenais was called to the chamber in which he granted private audiences. The chamber was decorated in pale blue and everywhere was the golden fleur-de-lis of the Bourbons. A battery of gilded chairs upholstered in the blue of the walls and drapes, also bearing the fleur-de-lis, surrounded on the heads of golden lions. Atop the table, side by side, Athenais and the King sat swinging their feet.

"Are you going to give Monsieur Villechaise his pension?" she asked, referring to the petitioner who had been there when she'd arrived.

"I suppose so," he answered.

"When are you leaving for Flanders?"

Louis smiled and draped an arm about her shoulders, "Why? Are you anxious to see me gone?"

"Of course not, but I have to be prepared. I will miss you terribly."

"And I you," he returned, kissing her lightly on the temple, "but it will not be for long."

A man in the King's livery appeared in the doorway. Bowing apologetically he told them, "Madame de La Valliere has requested an audience."

"Bring her in," Louis told him wearily.

"I should go," Athenais decided. With a brief kiss she slipped off the table and walked toward the door. She met Louise in the doorway.

"Please stay, Athenais," the woefully thin woman asked, her tone sincere. "I may need your help," she whispered as Athenais hesitated. The look of urgency and pleading in her eyes made Athenais sick at heart.

"All right."

Louise's illness had ravaged what little attractiveness she had had left. Her skin seemed stretched too tightly over her bones and the hand Athenais held was fragile and seemed transparent. She approached Louis, who still sat on the edge of the table, shyly and reverently.

"Your Majesty," she released Athenais's hand and sank to the floor in a deep curtsy.

"Rise, Madame," Louis said at last. In spite of his unkingly place on the table, his voice had changed from the teasing lightness he had displayed only moments earlier, to the serious, cool tones of the monarch. Athenais had witnessed this transformation frequently but she was nonetheless fascinated by his duality.

"Your Majesty," Louise repeated, rising. She spoke with her eyes downcast. "During my illness, when it seemed I must die, I realized that I must leave the Court if I am to apply myself to my vocation. By remaining here I am constantly reminded of the relationship which once existed between us and, by remembering, I am guilty of reliving my failures. Unless I am completely severed from the atmosphere of the Court I shall never be truly able to expiate my grievous sins against God."

"Louise." The King slid off the table and took his former mistress's hands into his own. From where she

had moved to, near the windows, Athenais saw those frail, bloodless hands begin to tremble. "Louise," the King repeated, "You are too young to take such a step. You are only thirty years old, not even halfway through your life. How do you know you will not regret such a step?"

"Please, please . . ." Louise pleaded, her voice quivering with emotion.

"If you must enter a convent, let me make you an Abbess. Choose any order, any establishment in the realm and it shall be yours. What better way to practice your devotion than by helping others to practice theirs?" His voice was gently, almost seductively persuasive.

From across the room, Athenais's eyes were glued to him, spellbound and amazed. His eyes were glittering and it was obvious that he was deriving a perverse sort of pleasure from the exquisitely subtle mental torture he was inflicting upon Louise. She longed to run to them and pull Louise out of his grasp but his voice was continuing, shaking even her senses.

"How can you be sure?" he went on, his words had become breathy, whispery, sounding almost unbearably like the murmurs of a lover. "How can you know?"

Louise was white, deathly pale and, without a sound, she slid to the floor in a faint.

Over her unconscious form, Louis raised his eyes toward a horrified Athenais. He wore an expression of triumphant self-satisfaction. "When she recovers," he said coolly, "tell her she can leave the Court whenever she pleases." Without a glance at the pitiful figure at his feet, he stepped over Louise and left the room.

Only when the door had closed behind him could Athenais force herself to move. She hurried to the door and told the lackey to fetch Madame de La Vallière's maid and also Madame de Maintenon. Whether she liked Françoise or not, Athenais knew Louise would find

comfort in her presence. She moved to the table which held crystal and gold decanters of the King's favorite wines and the water which he habitually added to them. Soaking a linen napkin with the water, Athenais returned to Louise. Sitting on the floor, she cradled Louise's head in her lap as she applied the wet napkin to the unconscious woman's pale cheeks. Soon Louise began to stir and blue-rimmed eyes opened and fastened themselves to Athenais's face.

"Why," she sobbed, "Why does he hate me so? Why must he be so cruel?"

"I don't know, Louise," Athenais answered honestly. "How can I know? I have been cruel to you, also."

"Not deliberately," Louise replied, her huge blue eyes spilling over with tears. "You made the same mistake I did. You fell in love with him."

Athenais looked away from the wide blue eyes so ready to forgive her. She was not by nature a person given to self-reproach and guilt but she knew that, were she in Louise's place, she would not so readily excuse the transgressions of others. "Yes," she answered, "I did fall in love with him. But there are times when I wonder why."

"He has the heart of a child," Louise told her, "and he allows his emotions to follow his heart."

Athenais couldn't find words to answer the fragile creature she held. So she placed her cheek against the limp blonde hair on top of Louise's head and held her close, rocking her like a child. They were silent and there was not a sound to be heard until the door opened and Françoise entered the room followed by Louise's maid.

* * *

Nothing was said between Louis and Athenais about

the scene in the council chamber. Athenais didn't understand this facet of his personality and it frightened her more than she would admit. She found it difficult to relax in his presence for days and even when he would murmur to her while making love the tones of his voice would remind her of the look in his eyes as he had spoken to Louise.

Louise, meanwhile, made hurried preparations to leave the Court. She'd received Louis's permission joyfully, even more so than she might have ordinarily.

The day before she was to formally take leave of the Court, Louise went to the Queen's apartment. Not caring that the rooms were full of courtiers, she approached the Queen and threw herself to the floor at her feet. "Forgive me!" she entreated. "Forgive me for all the transgressions I have committed against you!"

Marie-Thérèse, surprised out of her studied dignity, stared at the sobbing Louise. "Oh, my!" she cried. But at last, after several moments, she raised Louise to her and embraced her before the assembled people, declaring that Louise was very dear to her and she wished well in her vocation.

* * *

The Court gathered in the chapel to watch Louise de La Vallière profess her desire to become a Carmelite. She was dressed in a stark black gown of serge which contrasted sharply with the snow-whiteness of her skin. Her mother, the Marquise de Rémy, accompanied her and the Court, always susceptible to such a scene, broke into loud sobs during the Mass.

A carriage waited in the Marble Courtyard to take her away. Louis had given permission for it to enter as that very inner courtyard was generally reserved for the vehicles of Princes of the Blood, Ducs, Ambassadors,

and Marshals of France. The Court retired from the chapel to the courtyard, most snuffling and wiping still teary eyes.

Athenais walked with Madame and Monsieur, just behind the King and Queen. Glancing sideways at him, Athenais saw that Monsieur's eye makeup had run down his cheeks. With a gesture she showed him where the worst streaks lay and he dabbed at them with his handkerchief. Arriving at the courtyard, the King stood waiting for the departure of Louise. Athenais and the Queen stood on either side of him. Monsieur and Madame stood next to the Queen.

Slowly Louise approached. Her mother was near her fortunately, for when her eyes met those of the King she stumbled and was saved from falling by the restraining hands of that lady. She reached them at last and knelt on the hard surface of the courtyard before the King.

Louis's face was impassive. "Farewell, Madame," he said, loudly enough for the Court to hear, "I trust you will be content in your new home."

Louise waited for a moment, unsure that he had no more to say, but it became obvious that he had done with her and she rose. Turning, she walked slowly and unsteadily toward the carriage which would take her away from Louis and his Court forever. Athenais stole a glance at the King but he was like one of the sculptures of the gardens. He didn't move as the carriage started with a jolt and left the Marble courtyard or the courtyard beyond. As it entered the Avenue de Paris, he suddenly turned and began to speak:

"Bring my household together," he ordered. "I must leave immediately."

The procession, soon assembled, prepared to leave Versailles for Flanders. It was the procession Athenais remembered so well from her own journey with the army and she felt a little pang of annoyance that she was

to be left behind with the Queen and women of the Court.

The King's horse was led from the stables and Louis strode from the palace purposefully. His spurred boots sounded noisily in the marble paving stones and he held his gloves in one hand.

"*Adieu, Madame,*" he addressed the Queen, raising her hand to his lips. He repeated the gesture with Madame while Monsieur, who was accompanying him, stood patiently aside. At last he came to stand before Athenais.

"*Adieu, Athenais,*" he told her. She began to raise her hand for him to take but instead he drew her to him and kissed her forcefully and passionately before the entire Court.

Beside them, Athenais heard the sharply indrawn breath of the Queen and knew that her instinct for dignity and propriety had been outraged. As the King released her, Athenais glanced quickly at the Queen who was poorly concealing the chagrin his action had caused her. At a signal from the King, the splendid procession left the courtyard. Watching him, Athenais wondered if he had kissed her merely to punish the long-suffering Marie-Thérèse.

* * *

Louise de La Vallière, or Louise of Mercy as she was now called, left behind her children to be raised at the Court. Marie-Anne, Mademoiselle de Blois, was eight years old and Louis, Comte de Vermandois, was seven. They were the only things she regretted leaving and yet their very existences reminded her of the same sins she wanted so badly to forget. For them, before she left, Louise had had herself painted in an attitude of sacrifice. She rejected, in the painting, the sins and

temptations of the world portrayed in the form of jewels, a guitar, a mask, and cards. It was her farewell gift.

* * *

Athenais was relieved to have Louise gone. Although she had ceased to be a threat to Athenais's happiness years before, she was glad to be rid of the uneasy guilt the former favorite's presence caused. Athenais now turned her talents to getting rid of Françoise.

Louis was far away and so she had a great deal of free time. With little to occupy her mind other than the progress of Clagny, she brooded far more than she might have had Louis been there.

"I wish she were dead!" she muttered, then scowled as Madelon hurriedly crossed herself.

"You are not going to do anything, are you?" Madelon asked fearfully. She, for one, had not forgotten the terror of the trip to Paris so many years before.

"Of course not!" Athenais snapped. "Who do you think everyone would suspect were Françoise to suddenly die? There must be a way." She slid off the bed and paced the room ignoring the sighs of Madelon who had been hearing this same lecture every day since the King left.

"What do you suppose she wants?" Madelon asked.

"I don't know. She doesn't want jewels, she doesn't want titles. I can't believe she is only interested in saving Louis's soul. Françoise is much too selfish to work only from the goodness of her heart. There is something between her and the Bishop." She grimaced into her mirror. "Bossuet!" she spat. "That old bastard would like nothing better than to see me out on my ear!"

"I will be glad to see the King come back!" Madelon sighed.

"Why?"

"You are in a better mood when he is here."

"He's only been gone a few weeks. He won't be back for a month."

Behind her Madelon sighed again and left the room.

* * *

Françoise de Maintenon sat in Athenais's salon graciously sipping a cup of Turkish coffee which had become the fashionable drink. The topic turned to Louise de La Vallière.

Athenais waved airily. "It's all well and good for someone like Louise to make such sacrifices. I, on the other hand, could never restrict myself to convent life."

"I think I could," Françoise said, "if it weren't that I've grown too used to luxuries." She gestured toward her gown which, though somber in color, was expensively made and exquisitely embroidered.

"Do you really think you could be a sister?" Athenais asked idly. "A Carmelite, for instance, like Louise? You know they lead a hard, rigorous life."

"Well," Françoise considered this for a moment, "no, actually I don't think I could settle into the life of a convent at this point in my life. As I said, there was a time when I could have, but that time is past."

Athenais sipped her coffee disgustedly, her first plan was out.

* * *

"Maybe she wants to be his mistress," Athenais wondered aloud.

"His mistress! I hardly think she is the material of which mistresses are made!" Madelon laughed as she and Athenais walked in the gardens behind Versailles.

"How can she know that? Scarron was important and she hasn't been with anyone since he died."

"Somehow I can't imagine Françoise floating around in that purple marble bathtub or skipping down the secret passage to the King's bedroom."

Athenais laughed. "No, I can't either. I think I shall have her to my apartment again." She walked silently for some minutes. "I have another plan," she said at last.

"I hope this one works better than the convent idea," Madelon said.

* * *

Françoise, my dear," Athenais smiled, though the words burned her tongue. "Have you ever thought of marrying again?"

Françoise looked startled. "Why no! Why do you ask?"

"Just curiosity. After all, you are a widow, not unhandsome, and with a title. There are, I'm sure, a great many men at Court who would not be adverse to making you their wife."

"No, I have never considered remarrying."

"Oh, I'm surprised."

Françoise was intrigued. "Why are you surprised?"

"You've always loved children so. Look at the way you care for mine," Athenais shrugged. "I just find it surprising that you never wanted any of your own." She paused, "You know, Françoise, you're not too old. What are you? Thirty-nine? That's not too old."

"It's too old to start a family."

Athenais shook her head. "I don't think so. In fact, this morning in the gardens I was talking to a gentleman who thinks you're quite the handsomest woman at Court."

“Really? Who?”

Athenais smiled secretly. Françoise was not above a little vanity apparently. “Oh, let me see.” She hesitated, enjoying the suspense on Françoise’s face. “I know! It was the Duc de . . . Duc de . . . ah! The Duc de Villars-Brancas!”

Françoise’s face fell. “Athenais, he is seventy years old!”

“Really?” Athenais feigned shock. “He is a very young seventy.”

“Anyway, I don’t want to get married.”

“Françoise!” Athenais was exasperated. “Do you want to remain a virgin all your life?!”

“Yes.”

“What?” Athenais dabbed at her gown. Françoise’s answer had shocked her as she was raising her coffee to her lips. “Are you mad?”

“I am not!” the widow was indignant. “I don’t feel that man is required to debase himself if he doesn’t wish to.”

“Debase himself? Françoise, making love is not debasing oneself. You love children, how do you think they get here?”

“Well, if one wants to have children I suppose some sacrifices are necessary.”

Françoise . . .” Athenais began, but was cut off by the sudden rising of her guest.

“I find,” said Madame de Maintenon, “that this conversation is not to my liking. I’m afraid I shall have to leave.” Without another word she swept from the room leaving Athenais speechless.

* * *

Athenais and Madelon lay across the bed far into the night laughing over Françoise. The palace around them

had settled in for the evening and even the fountains in the gardens were still.

"I don't believe it!" Madelon giggled, happy to see her mistress in a better mood than she had been in for weeks.

"I tell you it's true. I think if a man touched her she probably vomit all over him!"

"That's incredible! Do you think . . ." Madelon began.

"Shhhh!" Athenais stopped her. "I hear horses in the courtyard." Slipping off the bed, Athenais walked across the dark room to the window. In the distance, apparently so their noise wouldn't wake the sleeping residents of the palace, a group of horsemen were turning their mounts over to grooms. The men walked toward the front of the palace and Athenais could make out the figure of Louis as well as his valet Bontemps. The other men she recognized as guards and a few courtiers. "It's Louis!" she cried. "He's come back!"

Hurriedly she changed from the gown she was wearing into a new one of silk and lace she'd just had made. Its peach color added a delicate blush to her cheeks and emphasized the darkness of her eyes. She slipped into the matching robe and sat down at her dressing table to brush her hair. At last she stood up. "I'm ready," she proclaimed. "Good night, Madelon." Not bothering with a candle to light her down the familiar passage, she slipped the latch of the mirror panel and stepped inside. With a smile and a wave to Madelon, she closed the panel and walked down the narrow passage.

Inside Louis's chamber the King's sleepy companions helped him prepare for bed. Athenais waited impatiently inside the passage for what seemed an hour and finally heard the last of the courtiers bid the King goodnight and move toward the door. Stealthily she opened the panel and peeked into the room. Louis lay in bed, eyes

closed, as Bontemps ushered the other gentlemen out the door. When the valet had disappeared into the anteroom beyond, she stepped into the bedchamber and ran across the floor. She passed the balustrade, crossed the ruelle, and jumped onto the soft feather bed startling Louis who sat upright.

"Good evening, Your Majesty," she smiled and giggled at the surprise on his face.

"You seem to be in a good mood," he laughed. "I would have come to your room but it is so late. I thought you would be asleep."

"I heard you in the courtyard. I was talking to Madelon."

"Ah, well get in."

Discarding her robe, Athenais slid into the wide royal bed and lay her head contentedly on the King's shoulder. "I missed you," she said.

"And I missed you," he replied.

"Did you?" Leaning on one elbow she stared into his eyes, "Did you really?"

Louis looked at her curiously and then, seeing the twitching of the corners of her mouth as she tried to keep from laughing, smiled. "Yes, I did really!" he replied in her tone of voice.

"I don't believe you," she said stubbornly.

"I can make you believe me," he smiled. His long, sharp fingers jabbed at her sides and he began to tickle her until she screamed with gasping laughter. At the door, Monsieur Bontemps who usually slept on a cot at the foot of Louis's bed, peeked in, investigating the noise. In the dim light of the candle burning next to the bed, he saw Athenais and Louis laughing and, smiling, he discreetly returned to the anteroom and its sofa.

Chapter XX

"Oh Louis," Athenais sighed wistfully. "I wish it were warm enough to ride on the canal!" She gazed out the window of the coach in which she and the King were riding toward Trianon. The Venetian Republic had recently made a gift to Louis XIV of a fleet of gondolas complete with gondoliers to pole them but as yet the weather had not been fine enough for an outing in the elegant little boats.

"It will be soon," he predicted.

"But by then you will be gone to Flanders."

The war in Flanders still raged and Louis intended to join the forces at the front immediately following the Easter celebrations.

"Yes, I suppose I will."

Athenais glanced at him curiously. "What is bothering you? Surely it can't be Bortaloue's sermon this morning."

Louis Bortaloue, considered by many to be as great an orator as Bossuet, had come to Court to preach the Lenten services. Thus far most of his sermons—so long that ladies who were afraid of being unable to stay in place for hours had begun to bring small china vessels which they concealed beneath their skirts; these were rapidly acquiring the name "Bortalous"—had been aimed unmistakably at the King and his Mistress. He told the Court, his eyes riveted to the royal box at the back of the chapel, that a monarch must set an example by his behavior and if the monarch is willing to be

debauched so must he expect his people to behave. So stirring and pointed were his sermons that Monsieur, who habitually sat between the Marquis d'Effiat and the Chevalier de Lorraine, had taken to sitting demurely beside his wife.

Athenais had adopted an attitude of unconcern and listened with obviously bored attention. She had assumed that Louis felt the same but now she was not so sure. "Do you want to go back to the palace?" she asked. "We don't have to go to Trianon, you know."

"No, I'd rather be at Trianon when . . ." He stopped the glanced out the window.

"When what?" she asked, a nervous sensation starting in the pit of her stomach. It had been a year since Louise de La Vallière had entered her convent. She remembered the rejoicing the departure of that lady had evoked in the hearts of Bossuet and others who cringed at their sovereign's penchant for lovely ladies. She also remembered the numerous times in the past year she had seen Françoise in conference with the Bishop or the King's confessor, Père de La Chaise. After most of those conferences, Françoise had found some excuse for meeting with Louis.

Trianon glittered in the early spring sunshine. Ordinarily Athenais loved the tiny jewel of a palace but today, knowing that there must surely be something horrendous Louis had to tell her when they arrived, she dreaded every turn of the wheels which took them there. Glancing sideways at the King, she saw that he was gazing out the window, apparently at the passing gardens but a muscle twitched convulsively in his cheek indicating that his mind was not on the flowers and shrubs.

When at last they arrived, Louis handed her out of the coach and walked beside her into the main salon of her suite. The glass-paned doors of the *Chambre des*

Amours stood open. The sunshine which shone through the windows of that room struck the wide bed and its golden tissue hangings and was reflected into a shimmering aura of light. At any other time it would have been a beautiful, inviting sight but today it seemed out of place. Athenais walked to the doorway and closed the doors. When she turned back to the King, he had discarded his cloak and sat in a chair with a crystal goblet of wine in his hand. Idly, he twirled the goblet and watched as the liquid within swirled. Without a word Athenais tossed her own cloak over his on the sofa and knelt on the carpet before him. She rested her elbows on his knees, her chin in her hands, and waited for him to speak. He didn't and at last she could wait no longer.

"Tell me," she asked softly. But he merely took another sip of the wine and said nothing. "Please," she added, and the fear which was growing inside her made her voice quiver.

He set the goblet on a small round table beside his chair and, for the first time since they'd entered the room, looked at her. The look struck her like a blow for his eyes and entire face there was a touch of sadness, a mournful quality which shook her deeply.

"Louis." It was a plea, begging to be spared what she knew by now was coming and, at the same time, begging to be told quickly. But still he said nothing. One beringed hand extended toward her, one finger stroked her cheek, but the look remained the same. "Why?" she whispered.

Taking a breath, he spoke at last. "Bossuet." He glanced past her toward the view of the gardens visible through the window. "He has refused me the Sacrament unless . . ." He stopped.

"Refused you the Sacrament? He cannot do that! You can make him change is mind, you can force him!"

He shook his head, "I cannot force the hand of the church. No priest will dare oppose him. What about when I go to Flanders? What if I am to die?"

"You will not die!" Her hands caught at the arms of the chair.

"There is nothing I can do."

Athenais gazed at him but he continued to stare into the gardens. "And so . . . And so you must abandon me?"

"I do not abandon you. Clagny is very near."

"Clagny! You are banishing me to Clagny?"

"Not banished . . ." he paused. "You will retain your apartment at Versailles."

"But I will live primarily at Clagny." His silence confirmed her fears. They sat in silence for long moments, Louis in his chair, Athenais kneeling before him, and then the silence was broken as giggles began to well up into her throat. The giggles gave way to laughter that was mirthless and mocking.

"Athenais . . ." Louis was shocked to see her there, laughing uncontrollably as tears began to run down her cheeks.

"She's done it!" she gasped. Rising from the floor, she walked a few steps and leaned against the mantle of the fireplace, one hand on its marble surface and the other to her breast as her lungs began to burn for more than the choking breaths she could take. "She's actually done it! By God, I should have known! She and Bossuet."

"Athenais." Louis had risen from his chair and crossed the room toward her. He reached out a hand to touch her but she twisted away.

"Be careful or Bossuet will have you excommunicated!" she warned.

"Come lie down," his tone was concerned. "You are overwrought."

"Lie down!" she retorted. "Aren't you afraid that lightning will strike you if you enter that bedroom with me?" Again he reached out toward her and again she moved away. "Be careful! You are playing with hellfire, Your Majesty." Her use of his title had struck him she could tell. The informality which had existed between them, her acceptance of him as a man regardless of his position in life, had always been precious to him. Now, however, she'd deliberately placed that rank between them. His face composed itself into the rigid lines of the King. The casual concern in his stance was replaced by the formal posture of the monarch.

"You will go to Clagny," the King told her.

She stood frozen in place. It seemed that the air around them had chilled and she looked for a trace of the tender Louis in the implacable face of the monarch. At last she dropped a grand Court curtsy. "Yes, Your Majesty," she said with a tinge of mockery in her words. "I will go to Clagny." She picked up her cloak and swirled it around her shoulders. At the door she stopped, the single coach they'd arrived in stood in the courtyard. There was no other means of transportation available. Turning back to the room she saw that he had moved to the windows and stood with his back to her. "Are you coming?" she asked, adding, "Your Majesty."

His head lowered almost imperceptibly and then he replied, "You will send the coach back from Versailles."

She swept another curtsy in the doorway. "Yes," she answered, and would have said "Your Majesty" but he whirled toward her and the look in his eyes froze the words in her throat. She could only turn and flee to the coach.

Easter came and the King, to the joy of those at Court who sided with Bossuet, was received into the good graces of the Church. Immediately following the celebrations he had left for Flanders without saying goodbye to Athenais who languished at Clagny.

Athenais, far from languishing as the courtiers imagined, spent her time decorating and redecorating the salons and galleries of her palace. Money flowed in from the tax revenues she had been given and flowed out as quickly to the tradesmen who came every day representing the silk makers of Lyons, the lace factories, the drapers and carpetmakers and tapestry weavers of the Gobelins, the Savonnerie, Aubusson, and Beauvais. Everything was marble, silver, crystal, or gold. Much of the furniture was solid silver or sheathed in gold. Artisans practiced their crafts on mosaics and paintings and etchings. She promenaded through the palace at all hours accepting the praise, both spoken and unspoken, of the nearly twelve hundred workmen still employed there. Madelon, who had accompanied her there along with the rest of the suite, especially enjoyed the workmen.

In addition, with the star attraction of Versailles and most of the men of the Court absent, her palace became a fashionable target for outings of courtiers. She led promenades through the palace, pointing out work which had been completed since the last visit of whatever person might be there, and Françoise brought the children.

Louis-Auguste, now six years old, was out of his baby skirts and dressed in a miniature but perfect suit which would have done justice to the most fashionable courtier at Versailles. Louis-Cesar, three, still dressed in lace and satin gowns which caused him no end of chagrin, and Louise-Françoise, two, gave every indica-

tion of inheriting the best characteristics of both her parents.

Athenais and Françoise sat on the sloping bank of the lake behind Clagny while the children frolicked near the waters edge under the watchful eye of their nurses.

"It is lovely here," Françoise smiled.

"Yes," Athenais answered shortly. The grudge she bore this woman was deep and abiding and, were it not for the children, she would never have tolerated her presence.

"Just lovely," she continued, ignoring the sarcasm in Athenais's tone. "I wouldn't mind retiring from Court if it could be to someplace as peaceful as this."

"I wouldn't know anything about retiring from Court," Athenais snapped.

"Oh, I'm sorry." Françoise turned to her, "How thoughtless of me." She reached out to pat Athenais's hand but Athenais jumped up and strode away toward the palace.

"Maman! Maman!" Louis-Cesar's babyish voice called to her.

She paused to compose the angry lines of her face and turned to him. "Yes, darling?"

He made a charming picture as he ran across the lawns, his skirts slapping his ankles and his blonde curls bouncing. "Don't go away!"

She knelt in the grass and held out her arms. "I'm not going away," she assured him.

"Papa went away," he reasoned.

"Papa will be back. He will not be away forever."

"You shouldn't call him Papa." Louis-Auguste had joined them and addressed his brother severely with all the authority of his three years' seniority. "You should call him His Majesty or the King."

The three year old Comte glared at the six year old Duc and Athenais laughed. "He can call the King

Papa here if he wants to."

"But Madame de Maintenon said it was disrespectful to Monseigneur the Dauphin," Louis-Auguste declared.

"Well, this is my house and you can be disrespectful to anyone you choose here," she told him, "except me, of course."

"I don't like the Dauphin," Louis-Cesar lisped. "He is boring."

Louise-Françoise had, by this time, toddled over to the family conference. "Boring!" she repeated.

Louis-Auguste drew himself up to his full few feet in height and threw his younger brother and sister a look of outraged dignity. "His Royal Highness is the Dauphin and you should not speak of him so!"

"Well I don't like him," Louis-Cesar insisted stubbornly. "He is our brother and I don't like him." His older brother opened his mouth to speak but he continued, shaking a lace-ruffled finger in his face. "And you are my brother and I don't like you!" With a swish of his satin skirts he turned and walked off quickly toward the lake. Louise-Françoise toddled after him and Louis-Auguste stood staring after them, his mouth open.

"Well!" He turned toward Athenais and threw her an accusing look. "You should not encourage him in his attitudes," he told her. With a profound bow he turned and walked away, his red-heeled shoes stepping with studied precision.

Athenais watched a little sadly. He was six years old and already a courtier, aware of where to flatter, where to avoid. His life was already beginning to be shaped by the opportunism which figured so importantly at Court. He would, she had no doubt, become the epitome of a good nobleman, the example of correctness, but with it would come all the falseness and furtiveness of which

she had seen so much.

* * *

Madelon brought Athenais her dressing gown from the armoire in her bedchamber. Her apartment at Clagny eclipsed even the apartments of the King at Versailles for their beauty and luxury. There was a series of reception salons with anterooms separating them. Her bechamber was a wonder of colored marbles and precious woods and the hangings had been specially woven for her and to her specifications. The floor was covered with a Savonnerie carpet into which her coat-of-arms had been woven and its soft colors were repeated throughout the room.

"Thank you," she told the maid. She dropped the towel she had wrapped around herself upon emerging from her bath. Leaving the maids to tidy the mosaic bath, she passed through the connecting doorway and into her bedchamber. There was no fire in either of the two cavernous fireplaces built to warm the room. It was well into summer and the windows had been opened to admit the sweetly scented air from the gardens.

"Ahhh," she sighed gratefully as she sank into a large, generously padded chaise longue. "I'm always glad when everyone has gone and it's quiet in the evenings."

Madelon, who was about to agree, started as a knock sounded hollowly at the main entrance to the apartment a few rooms away. She hurried out of the room to see what it was.

"Athenais! Athenais!" A high masculine voice echoed through the rooms as wooden heels clattered across uncarpeted floors.

"In here, Monsieur," she called. What could Philippe want? she wondered, preparing to rise.

"Do not get up," he ordered as he entered the room. Monsieur, as usual, was a vision in the candlelight. His suit was of magenta satin with gold braid everywhere and gold lace spilling out at the collar and covering his delicate hands. His hair, so like the King's, was tied with gold and magenta ribbons in lieu of a hat. Gallantly he kissed Athenais's hand and beckoned his companion into the room.

The Chevalier de Lorraine, Monsieur's favorite, was dressed in darkest blue which emphasized his blondness and delicate coloring. He was beautiful as an angel and Athenais could see what Monsieur saw in him.

"Good evening, Madame," the Chevalier bowed. Philippe had been overjoyed when Louis had forgiven his Chevalier for the murder of the first Madame and allowed him to return from Italy. They'd resumed their former relationship immediately.

"Please sit down," she invited. "May I order some wine for you?" They agreed and, rising from her chaise longue, she went to the door and instructed Madelon to get the wine from the salon. Turning back to Monsieur, who sat with Lorraine on the sofa, she observed, "You look especially happy tonight, Monsieur. Is there a reason?"

"Yes!" he exclaimed, his tiny black eyes alight, "Liselotte is pregnant!"

"Really? So soon?" Madame had, the year before, given birth to a son who had been named Philippe II and was already being referred to as the Petit Monsieur. An earlier child, conceived soon after their marriage, had died. "That is indeed good news!"

The wine arrived and they drank a toast. "Madame," Philippe began and then stopped. "I hope I shall not offend you, but . . ."

Go ahead, Monsieur," she urged. She expected a lecture about the King and was prepared for it. Only that

afternoon the Queen had come to visit and the veiled jibes of her ladies had taken their toll of Athenais's good humor. She steeled herself for another attack.

"Well," he plunged on, "that necklace just does not go with that gown!"

To their surprise she laughed aloud. Her hand went to the clasp of the necklace she'd put on when apprised of his arrival and she removed it. "Forgive me, Monsieur," she smiled, still chuckling. "I thought you were going to taunt me about the King."

"Taunt you? Why should I?" He was the picture of offended innocence.

She became serious again, "Everyone else has, the Court, the Queen . . ."

"The Queen?" Monsieur's eyes rolled and Lorraine hid a smile. "That prune? Pah . . . little she knows! She and her dwarfs and animals. I would rather have Liselotte's pet duck than all the Queen's dwarfs put together."

"And Madame de Maintenon . . ." she continued.

"Another prune!" Monsieur finished his wine and began to explore the room. "You must not listen to such people, Madame. You must ignore them." He opened her armoire and began examining her gowns. "This is lovely," he said, pulling one then another from the cabinet. "Is this new?" Occasionally one caught his fancy and he held it in front of himself before the mirror. "As I was saying, you must rise above the criticism of others." He pulled a gown of black velvet covered with silver stars which were embroidered over the bodice and skirt. "You must not let them see that you are afraid or hurt. This is really beautiful." He held the black gown up to the mirror. "They are a pack of dogs who smell fear. If you let them have the scent they will rip you apart." He gazed into the mirror then turned to Athenais. "May I try this one on?"

Bishop Bossuet descended from his carriage and stood in the courtyard of Clagny. He frowned at the magnificence of the palace and the thought of the services for which it was being rewarded. He had hoped, when he refused the Sacraments to the King, that a long stay away from Court would jar the King's mistress to her senses. Now, however, as he saw the palace for the first time, he realized exactly how difficult dislodging this woman might prove to be. The sprawling wings and gilded gates of Clagny were not the gift of a man to a woman for whom he has merely a sexual desire. It was, as work continued and luxury was piled upon luxury, almost a monument, a celebration. With a sigh, he started toward the front entrance.

"Is he here?" Athenais asked.

"He's here!" The word had spread up the corridors and stairs of the palace to her apartment where she waited in full Court regalia.

The Bishop mounted the great staircase to Athenais's apartment. He likened the experience to going to meet with the Devil in Hell. He wished she'd consented to talk with him on the grounds in the gardens or in one of the downstairs salons. Walking through the salons he was aware of the sour looks and muttered remarks of the workmen who apparently knew why he was there and disapproved of it. Whatever else could be said of Madame de Montespan, she had a power over men which amounted to a fascination. At last he arrived at the apartment and was admitted through a series of splendid rooms to one particularly lovely anteroom where Athenais awaited him.

"Good afternoon, Monsieur Bossuet," she smiled, reclining gracefully on a sofa placed near a large window through which the extensive gardens were visible.

"Madame," he replied.

"Would you like some refreshment? A little wine

perhaps?"

"I am not on a social visit, Madame." He refused the chair she offered him and remained standing.

"Pardon me. Pray, don't let me keep you from your mission."

"I have come, Madame, to enquire as to whether your stay here has been sufficiently enlightening, whether you have, during the course of your stay, realized the enormity of your position?"

"My lord Bishop," she smiled sweetly, "I realized the enormity of my position the first time I saw Versailles."

"I think you know what I mean."

"Yes, I think I do. However, I feel that your motives, like those of the wonderful Madame de Maintenon, are not what they seem to be."

"I don't know what you mean."

Athenais smiled meanly. "I think you do, my lord. I submit to you the motives which drive both you and Françoise to this great reformation is not one of Christian concern, but of pride."

"Pride!" the Bishop was outraged.

"Yes, pride!" she repeated. "What greater objective could you work toward? What greater prize could you obtain than the salvation of the King? How the clergy would commend you? Why, even the Pope would take notice."

"And what about Madame de Maintenon?"

"Yes, Françoise. Well, in her case she is motivated by an intense desire to take my place."

"You slander her, Madame."

"Do I? I think not. Perhaps I slander the King's good taste but not Françoise. Trust me, my lord, she wants to take my place. Not in the King's bed, of course. Françoise is much too fastidious for such human pursuits, but certainly in his affection and certainly in his palace."

"We digress, Madame. You are shifting the conversation to others."

"Better to talk about my sins than your's, eh?" She laughed. "All right, which of my many grievous sins shall we discuss? Greed? Pride? Lust? Oh, do let's start with lust, it was always my personal favorite!"

"Madame! I do not believe this!"

"But I tell you it's true!" Athenais rose from her sofa and walked across the room. "Do you think that if lust hadn't been my favorite sin the King would have stayed with me all these years?"

"Madame!" Bossuet repeated. "Have you no shame?"

"Not much," she admitted.

"Does it not bother you that you are leading the King down a path of damnation?"

"He's done enough leading in his time!" She refilled her glass from the decanter. "Do not try to make me the cause of his troubles. He had a mistress already when I came to Court."

"We are not concerned with his other mistresses," Bossuet declared. "We are concerned only with his current mistress."

"Ah, I see. In that case you'd better write to the King's confessor in Flanders for I doubt that Louis has been living the life of a celibate these past two months."

Bossuet was indignant. "Père de La Chaise assures me that His Majesty has indeed been blameless these past weeks."

"No! Are you joking with me?" She laughed. "He's helping your cause, my lord." Her smile turned cruel. "By the time he gets back he'll be desperate enough to sleep with the Queen!"

The Bishop stared at her. She had reduced the most celebrated orator in France to speechlessness. "Madame!" he managed at last, "I shall not stay and

listen to this."

Athenais shrugged. "All right then. Madelon!" The other woman entered the room. "Show the Bishop the door."

"Am I being thrown out?" he asked.

"You said you didn't want to stay and listen, my lord. I merely took you at your word."

"Very well, I shall indeed leave. But I warn you, Madame, I shall reform you. I have pledged to save the soul of the King's mistress."

"Fine! Perhaps you'd better have a talk with Madelon, there."

The Bishop shot a look at Madelon who stood in the doorway. She recoiled.

"Athenais!" The voice of Gabrielle de Thianges came to them faintly.

"Come in, Gabrielle!" she called. "You are just in time." Her sister entered the room and Athenais took her to the Bishop. "Here is another of His Majesty's women, my lord. My sister, Gabrielle."

"Your sister, your waiting woman . . ." the Bishop stuttered. "Is there none of your family who has not sinned with the King?"

"Oh, yes!" Athenais cried gaily. "Our brother, Louis-Victor has never compromised the royal name."

"Not," Gabrielle added, "unless Monsieur counts."

"That's right." Athenais turned to the Bishop. "Does Monsieur count?"

Bossuet's fingers worked over the exquisitely worked crucifix at his throat. He said nothing.

"Of course, there's Marie," Gabrielle said.

"Yes," Athenais agreed. "Our sister who is the Abbess of Fontrevault. I swear on the heads of my children that she is completely innocent."

"You should be thankful for that," the Bishop declared. "Although I hardly think it's appropriate to

swear on the heads of your illegitimate children."

"They are not illegitimate! They are legitimized."

"Good day, Madame!" The Bishop obviously could stand no more and retreated through the salons of Athenais's apartment. Shortly the sounds of his carriage departing made Athenais relax.

"At least he's gone!" she sighed.

"You have not helped your case, Madame," Madelon told her disapprovingly as she began to unwind the jewels from her mistress's hair.

"How have I hurt it?" Athenais asked. "Can Louis come to see me less than he has done in the past two months? He would never take Clagny away from me nor would he refuse to pay for it. He would never reduce the mother of his children to beggary. What difference can it have made?"

* * *

Athenais stood in the courtyard of Clagny examining the placing of statuary along the long façades of the three main sections of the palace. Jules Hardouin-Mansart, her architect and the originator of the mansard roofs which decorated Versailles and Clagny, stood beside her explaining the various details of the operation. Her attention was caught by the sound of hoofbeats on the drive outside the courtyard gates.

Turning toward the sound, she saw a lone horseman leap from the back of his mount and advance toward her. His clothing was muddy and dusty and his demeanor suggested long hours in the saddle.

"Madame de Montespan?" he addressed her, bowing. "I have a message for you." From the depths of his coat he pulled a communication on which Athenais saw the royal seal. Her heart skipped a beat—it was from the King!

"Thank you!" she cried. "Please go inside." She beckoned a lackey. "Follow this man," she told the messenger. "He will see that you are taken care of." She held the message silently and then remembered Monsieur Mansart beside her. "You will excuse me? I must go to my rooms."

"Of course." The young man bowed with a smile.

She hurried along the galleries of the palace, for once ignoring the admiring compliments which rose from the workmen, and entered her apartment. Madelon was supervising the hanging of a new drapes in the anteroom and looked up with a smile as she heard Athenais enter the room. "What is it?" she asked, taking one look at the flushed cheeks and shining eyes of her mistress.

"A message!" Athenais waved the sealed parchment. "From Louis!"

They shut themselves in the bedchamber, away from prying eyes and ears. "Open it! Open it!" Madelon urged.

"I can't! What if it's bad news?"

"It can't be bad news. Give it to me." Madelon grabbed for the message but Athenais held it out of her grasp.

"I'll open it!" she said as she broke the seal. She scanned the page silently while Madelon suffered torments of curiosity. Then, after a moment, she screamed. "We're going back! We're going back to Versailles!" Tossing the paper into the air, she wrapped her arms about Madelon and danced her around the room. She burst through the doorway, ran through her apartment and then down into the gallery. In the great gallery which ran along one entire wing, she found hundreds of the workmen having their noon meal. Gaining their attention by banging a board against the floor she shouted her news the length of the gallery:

"The King has called me back to Versailles!"

In a body, the workmen rose and cheered and, with a deepy curtsy, Athenais swept out of the room and back to her apartment. "Pack my things!" she ordered. "I want to be back at Versailles by this afternoon!"

* * *

With the joy of a child, Athenais took possession of her apartment next to the King's at Versailles. She went from room to room touching the walls, the hangings, the furniture. She had been gone for just over two months and it was like heaven to be back. Within minutes of her arrival, word began to spread through the Court and it was not long before Françoise de Maintenon arrived.

"Athenais!" she entered the apartment cautiously. "Why are you back?"

"Because the King has ordered me back!" Athenais laughed.

"I don't believe you," Françoise snapped.

Without a word, Athenais thrust the message from the King in the startled Françoise's face. As she read it, the woman's cheeks paled and she raised her eyes slowly. "I see," she handed the paper back. "I must go now."

Françoise left the apartment. Not long afterward, the carriage of the Bishop Bossuet was seen driving out from Versailles and along the road by which, not far away, Louis XIV was returning from the war.

* * *

Louis returned to Versailles late in the evening and retired to his rooms. Athenais, in her rooms, did not join the rest of the courtiers in the courtyard to welcome him back nor did she expect him to join her via the

secret passage or any other way. She had begun to think that her victory was a hollow one, that she might as well return to Clagny.

Bishop Bossuet, meeting the returning King on the road, had thrown himself in the dirt at the King's feet, begging him to send Athenais back to Clagny, pleading with him to keep to the exemplary behavior he had displayed in the past months. And Louis had agreed. He had sworn to Bossuet that his invitation to Athenais was merely the same invitation he issued to any member of his nobility and that he had no intention of resuming their relationship. In fact, he told the worried prelate, he was planning to declare his intentions before the Court. He would, he said, invite members of the clergy, the Court, even the Queen to a soiree in Athenais's chambers where they would declare, before witnesses, their good intentions. He didn't doubt that Madame de Montespan would see the sense and necessity in his plan.

"Sense! Necessity! Why didn't he just leave me to stagnate in the country!" Athenais stormed. "Maybe I should return to Clagny and avoid this humiliation!" She threw herself across her bed dejectedly.

"If you do that the King will be angry with you," Madelon cautioned her. "Better to play along."

"I suppose."

* * *

The doors connecting Athenais's salon and anteroom had been thrown open to accommodate the crush of people who had come to witness the profession of Athenais's and Louis's good intentions. Wine flowed and the milling crowds declared that, while they didn't care if the King slept with Athenais or not, this was certainly a break in the monotony. In the anteroom, away from the press of the crowds which spilled over into the

corridor, Louis played host to his most important guests. The Queen, Bishop Bossuet, Père de La Chaise, Madame de Maintenon, Madame, Monsieur and, of course, the Chevalier de Lorraine and Madame de Thianges awaited the emergence of Athenais from her bedchamber.

"I can't go through with it!" Athenais hissed, hearing the buzz of voices just outside her bedroom doors.

"You don't have any choice," Madelon returned. "Now get out there!"

With a deep sigh and a last glance at the mirrors, she moved toward the doors and slipped through. The conversation stopped as Athenais, seeing the King for the first time since his return, sank into a deep curtsy before him. She knew she looked lovely. Her gown was the black velvet with which Monsieur had been so taken upon his visit to Clagny. Unrelieved by the usual froths of lace and ribbon, its only decorations were the masses of silver stars embroidered into the deep nap. With her hair swept up into tiny curls into which miniscule black velvet bows had been tied, and diamonds flashing at her throat, wrists, ears, and fingers, she looked at once demure and ravishingly elegant. The velvet was, she had to admit, a bit warm for midsummer but its rich look became her and its stark blackness emphasized her white skin. She had, much to the puzzlement of the dressmaker, ordered the sleeves of the gown cut tightly and to her wrists, as opposed to the elbowlength full sleeves in fashion. The neckline was cut to a V at the center front, rose just covering her shoulders, and crossed her back in a straight line. It was as unusual as it was striking and it aroused a murmur from the crowd as she appeared.

"Madame," Louis raised her hand to kiss and carefully she avoided his eyes. Better to wait and see than to plead for a response and find none immediately.

Before the courtiers Louis and Athenais pledged to live in what Bossuet termed "Christian chastity" and toasts were offered by members of the assembly. At last, the ceremonial over, the crowd began once more to mill about discussing what they had seen.

"Athenais?" The King's voice startled her as she stood alone in the open French windows on the balcony.

"Yes, Sire?" she asked, not turning around.

"I hope you understand and are not angry with me." His tones were cordial, friendly.

"Did you really leave Bossuet with his mouth open?" he asked.

She permitted a tiny smile to touch the corners of her mouth. "Yes, I did."

They stood silently, gazing out toward the front courtyards of Versailles each coping with his thoughts and memories.

"You look very lovely," he said at last but, Athenais noticed with a thud of her heart, he was still the King, still cordially attentive, still cool.

"Thank you," she managed.

"Would you like some wine?"

"Yes."

Signaling a lackey, he took two goblets of wine from a silver tray. He held one out to her and, as she reached for it, their fingers touched. The effect was electric and both let go of the long-stemmed glass letting it drop to the marble balcony. Its shattering went unnoticed in the hum of voices within the room and Louis, setting his glass aside, pulled a lawn and lace handkerchief from his pocket and reached down to brush the running liquid from her skirts.

At the same time Athenais, who had dropped her fan, reached down to retrieve it and, halfway down, they stopped. For the first time Athenais looked the King in the eyes and he returned her look. A light flush spread

over her cheeks and she straightened and resumed her examination of the courtyards. Neither said a word for a long moment and then:

“Athenais?” His voice had changed. He was no longer the Monarch, the brilliant and untouchable Sun King. He was Louis.

“Yes?” She turned and gazed full into his eyes.

Wordlessly he took her hand and they re-entered the crowded antechamber. Politely, the drone of conversation ceased expectantly as their guests waited for what was apparently going to be more speeches and good intentions. Still hand and hand they reached the front of the room and faced their guests who smiled and waited. But nothing was said.

Before the startled eyes of the Queen, Bossuet, Madame de Maintenon, and the Court, Louis made a profound and graceful bow and Athenais sank to the floor in a curtsy. Rising, they turned and left the room, and the gilded doors of Athenais’s bedchamber slammed decisively behind them.